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REDTOP RUBE, THE VIGILANTE PRINCE; Or, THE BLACK REGULATORS OF ARIZONA.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,

AUTHOR OF "SANCHO PEDRO, THE BOY BANDIT," ETC., ETC., ETC.



THE BURNING FUSE WAS GROWING SHORT; THE FIRE WAS NEARING THE POWDER; AND THAT MEANT DEATH TO REDTOP RUBE.

Redtop Rube.

The Vigilante Prince;

OR,

The Black Regulators of Arizona.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,
AUTHOR OF "THE BOY BANDIT," "LEADVILLE
NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

"I SAY, Tom, who's that pilgrim over thar with ther red head?"

"Wal, you've told all I know. He's over thar, he's red-headed an' he's a pilgrim."

"D'ye s'pose he's come ter Torpedo Gulch ter stay?"

"Very likely he has, but, Sam, my boyee, I s'pect it 'll be under ground he 'll make his stop."

"Right you be, Tom Trufant, an' es long es it is ter be so, I'll tend ter his case right away. I don't like that young snoozer; he's too airy, an' too pritty fur our town; an' as I usually does what I says, you hear me when I swar he goes out o' town within an hour or chews lead!"

"Quite right, Sammy."

"Now, I'll ax ther landlord who he is an' prepare ter send him a-kinin'."

Torpedo Gulch was a hard place; there was no room to doubt that if one took his ideas from the testimony of all the rest of Arizona. It had long been ruled, and terrorized, by a gang of roughs who had been allowed remarkable latitude because of the fact that there was not enough wealth about the town to invite honest men.

Gold there was around Torpedo Gulch, and a few honest men, too, but both were scarce and the peaceable citizens held their peace and let the roughs have their own way.

Of this class, Sam Lefferts and Tom Trufant were fair specimens. The former was young in years—not more than twenty—but he was old enough in villainy to be a fit mate for Tom, while he was made for a bully from the start.

The object of the foregoing conversation was a youth who had come on the stage that day, had taken quarters at Mose Beldick's hotel, and was this evening sitting quietly in the bar-room, addressing no one and attending strictly to his own affairs.

He was probably nineteen years of age, and, though his face was quite beardless, he had a well-developed form and a manner of quiet resolution which had from the first irritated Sam Lefferts.

His allusion to the red-head of the "pilgrim" was caused by the fact that his hair was of a very dark reddish-brown, and decidedly handsome, despite Sam's sneer.

The latter approached the bar and asked the landlord for the name of the young man, and in reply Beldick referred to the six-by-four blank-book in which his guests "registered"—when they saw fit.

It was seldom used, however, and it was quite near the beginning where Mose pointed to a name.

"Read it," said Sam. "I don't know nothing 'bout sech rubbish."

"Reuben Redtop."

"Is that ther name?"

"Yes."

"Reuben Redtop?"

"Yes."

Lefferts burst into a laugh which deadened every other sound in the room and drew the gaze of all wonderingly upon himself. Never before had his associates seen him in such a mood—he was more given to cursing than laughing—and they did not know what to make of it.

He advanced to a table and struck his fist on the board with a force which made the glasses rattle.

"Oh! you durnation toughs an' t'arers!" he shouted, "jest hear me warble. Do you see that pilgrim over thar?—I say do you see him? Look the beauty well over, fur he's a tenderfoot from ther ground up. Look at ther color o' his ha'r! Now, gents, what do you s'pose is his name? That thar psalm-book what Mose keeps says—'Reuben Redtop!'"

None of the miners were dull enough to miss the point, and while they grinned in concert each one had something to say.

Sam was happy, and, with the blizzard fairly

started, he meant to follow it up. Advancing to within a few feet of the "pilgrim," he stooped down, placed his hands upon his knees and grimaced before his face.

"I say, Redtop Rube, er Sorrel-top, er whatever you calls yourself, ain't you afeard that ha'r will set your hat on fire?"

It was an embarrassing position for a stranger, old or young, and Mr. Redtop was expected to cower before the burly young ruffian, or, if he possessed courage, to become very indignant.

Instead of this, however, he retained the most perfect composure, and, raising the cigar he had been smoking, knocked off the ashes with the tip of his little finger.

"My dear friend," he said, "your observing spirit is remarkable, and it leads me to make a confession. It is commonly said that the big Chicago fire was started by Mrs. O'Leary's cow, but I don't mind saying to you that it was done by my hair. I indiscreetly scratched my head, and the friction was like sand-paper on a match. This is a fact previously unknown to history."

The perfect coolness of the youth surprised all and dumfounded Sam Lefferts for a moment, but his ugly temper soon found vent.

"You miser'ble little tenderfut," he vociferated, "how dare you lie ter me?"

"So you doubt it? Well, sometimes people won't take any stock in George Washington's hatchet."

His perfect coolness enraged the young bully more and more. If he had been frightened, or had shown signs of fighting, he would have been happy, but this composure was like a rock in the way of his wrath.

The majority of the men in the room were smiling at his cheek, even while they expected to see him ultimately drag the tenderfoot's pride low in the dust; but there were two or three men who had no sympathy with Sam and would gladly have helped his marked victim if they could.

"See hyar!" shouted Sam, "jest you let up on that style o' talk. We're men hyar, an' sensible, too. Et's very plain you're from the East. Durnation! will you talk sense, or shall I chuck you through the winder?"

"What harm has the window done?"

It was too much for the bully, and with a snarl of rage he thrust out one hand with the evident intention of catching Mr. Redtop's nose between his thumb and finger, but, quicker than his own motion, Rube's hand arose and the glittering blade of a double-edged knife was held just in front of his proboscis.

Not even a twinkle of his eyes betrayed satisfaction on the part of the pilgrim—his coolness seemed proof against everything—but Sam Lefferts had to pause, his arm awkwardly outstretched.

A look of fury then crossed his face.

"So you drawr a knife, do ye?" he shouted.

"That settles it; you get out o' this room on ther jump, or you'll go with a hole through you."

His hand had fallen to his belt, but, for a wonder, his revolver was not there.

He reached backward, quickly.

"Tom Trufant," he added, "give me your six!"

There could be no doubt of his intention, and as Reuben Redtop still sat as though unsuspecting of danger, one of the men before mentioned as being in sympathy with him, stepped forward. He was about to take a great risk, for, not being one of the roughs, he would thereby dare their anger, but he believed he saw his duty.

"Now, hold on, Sam," he said, pleasantly. "Let this all go as a joke. The boy did not draw the knife as a sign of war."

"Et don't make no diff'rence; he drewed it, an' that's enough. I'll bore him though the left lung. Hyar, Tom, be lively!"

Trufant handed over the revolver, but at that moment Redtop quietly arose.

"If I won't interrupt the matinee," he said, "I would like to remark that I did not come here to be shot, and though I am a man of peace I object to having my left lung tickled with lead. I, too, carry a battery!"

The last words were spoken more emphatically, the young man's coat flew open and out came a pair of revolvers.

One deep breath arose from the crowd, and then all looked for a tragedy.

Moses Halpine, the man who had before interfered, was not disposed to see the affair proceed, however. He saw that Reuben Redtop had plenty of courage, but he believed his fate was sealed if he went into the fight. Sam Lefferts would probably kill him, while if he

chanced to shoot the bully, the Torpedo roughs would certainly hang him outside the saloon door.

Such being the case, Halpine once more stepped in front of Lefferts.

"Come, Sam," he urged, "let me treat all right and call it square. What do we care for this boy?"

"We care so much that he can't come inter Torpedo Gulch an' kick up any row, nur put on any airs. You stand out o' ther way, Mose Halpine!"

Lefferts attempted to push the man aside and raise his revolver at the same time, but he had to deal with one his physical superior and Halpine caught his revolver and wrenched it away.

It was an act upon which he would not have ventured had he reflected as he ought. To arouse the tigers of the Gulch was terribly dangerous, as Mose soon found to his cost.

Every one of the spectators was surprised—astonished—as was Sam Lefferts, but as Trufant slipped another weapon into his hand his wits returned.

With his face distorted with rage he raised the revolver and took a snap-shot, so quick and accurate that Halpine had neither time to anticipate him nor attempt to dodge the lead; and, reeling back, the rash defender fell heavily to the floor.

The eyes of Redtop Rube flashed with a vividness one would not have thought possible, but before he could take any step toward vengeance a slight, girlish figure darted through the door and, with a moaning cry, threw herself upon the form of the fallen man.

CHAPTER II.

REDTOP RUBE FACES THE CROWD.

THIS unexpected interruption caused a stay in proceedings and some of those who recognized the girl as Zella Halpine, the daughter of the prostrate miner, felt a little sorry for what had occurred, though the majority looked on with stolid faces.

Reuben Redtop surmised the relationship, but after one expressive glance at Sam, moved forward and would have knelt beside him to examine the wound on his head which was bleeding so freely, but the young bully made two strides, caught him by the shoulder and jerked him back.

"Hands off!" he ordered. "No man can touch what I drop, an' es fur yerself, you'd better look ter number one. Boyees, step off ten paces and I'll allow ye ter see me perforate this tenderfut."

"Slow and easy, my double-barreled fighter!" said Rube, calmly. "I'll attend to you presently, but just now I prefer to attend to him!"

He pointed to the fallen man, over whom the girl was weeping and crying for a sign, a word, to show that he lived, and then once more he started toward his side.

A fierce exclamation fell from Sam's lips and his hand fell heavily on the other's shoulder.

"Keep back, or you're a dead—"

Thus far had he spoken when Mr. Redtop wheeled lightly, and at the same moment his fist shot out like a flash, stopping only when it touched the bully's neck.

The blow sounded like the crack of a whip, and it was immediately followed by a louder, heavier sound, as after a few vague motions, Sam went crashing to the floor.

A prettier blow had never been seen in Torpedo Gulch, but with all the town arrayed against the young stranger it seemed as though he had done a very foolish thing; now, indeed, would the dreaded roughs, against whom even strong men had never dared make opposition, seek the blood of "Redtop Rube."

He looked at them coolly, undisturbed by the sight of the weapons so numerous drawn, but some suggested that they delay until Sam was again in fighting trim and no one opposed the plan.

The bully was lying without a sign of life, and as his friends pulled him away to the water-pail, Reuben knelt beside Moses Halpine.

Up to that time Zella had paid no attention to her surroundings, but as she saw the young man skillfully examine the red line along her father's head she grew interested.

"Have no fear, miss," said Rube, quietly. "This hurt will never confine him to the house a day. He is stunned, but no real damage is done. See! the bleeding already grows insignificant and I believe—yes, there are signs of returning consciousness."

"May Heaven bless you, sir!" she said, with deep emotion. "My father is all I have."

"You may feel wholly at ease."

"But these men—they will kill us all," and she shuddered and looked around the room.

"Are they as bad as that?"

"They are perfect demons. My father has always said that if anything occurred to draw their anger upon him he would be killed without mercy. Now—now you see what has happened."

Reuben grew thoughtful. If matters were as bad as she said there was indeed reason for fear. He knew Torpedo Gulch had a bad name, but he was learning that it was worse than he thought it.

"Do you live in the village?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes."

"How far away?"

"A dozen cabins, or so."

"We must go there at once and take your father. The wretch who shot him is now unconscious from my blow, and we must not wait for him to recover."

"But how are we to carry my father?" Zella asked.

"If these fellows let us alone I can do it myself—Ha! he opens his eyes!"

Halpine did, indeed, recover at that moment, and that he was in full possession of his senses was shown by the keen glance he swept around the room.

At sight of Zella he looked freshly alarmed.

"You, here!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, with you!" she answered, firmly.

"Better be in a den of lions."

"Whatever the danger, my place is beside you," she replied, and Reuben wondered at such firmness in one of her years.

"Are you able to leave here?" he asked, addressing Halpine, who had not stirred.

"So far as strength goes, I am; but I am not so sure the roughs will let us pass. I have been plainly warned that if I ever raised my hand against them I should seal my own fate."

Up to this time the speaker had not stirred, but he had not been idle. His gaze had been used to good advantage and he saw his worst fears realized.

Beyond a doubt the roughs were ready to bar the way if they started.

Reuben Redtop, knowing less of Torpedo Gulch, failed to discover all this.

"Let us at least try," he urged. "If we wait until that young ruffian recovers—"

He ended abruptly as a good imitation of an Indian war-whoop arose from the further side of the room and Sam Lefferts came striding forward, a revolver in each hand and with an unmistakable purpose stamped on his face.

Halpine bounded to his feet, drawing his revolvers as he did so.

"We've got to fight!" he exclaimed; "there's no help for it. Don't be sparing of lead, young man, for mercy is neither given nor expected in Torpedo Gulch. Fight your way to the door and escape from the town, never to return."

"Look out, Redtop Rube!—I'm a-comun'!"

The words were howled by Sam Lefferts as he strode across the floor, and his allies began to close in on every side. Zella grew very pale and clung to her father, who was calmly desperate, but Rube retained his wits more than any one else in the room.

Clearly enough he saw that to engage in an exchange of shots against such odds meant sure death, and he resolved to try an old trick.

Up went his revolvers, two reports followed as one, and then with a jingle of glass out went the lights and total darkness fell over the room.

Another instant and Rube grasped Halpine's arm.

"The rear window!" he whispered; "they will not think of looking for us there."

Halpine caught at the idea and yielded obedience as men will when a strong mind comes to the surface in a crisis.

The noise made by the roughs, all of whom seemed called upon to loudly comment on the loss of the lights, drowned what noise the trio made as they glided across the floor, and for a moment it seemed as though they would reach the window in safety.

Suddenly, however, their way was barred, and as some one laid hold of Rube he laughed triumphantly.

"Ha! ha! I've got ye, my young rooster! Now, come down here!"

The last order was accompanied by a jerk and a thump against Rube's feet, but the young man did not "come down." On the contrary, he avoided the peril and, catching at his adversary, tossed him over his head with remarkable quickness.

His heavy fall was the signal for hostilities,

however, and as one of the roughs tried a shot, Halpine and his young ally no longer hesitated. They were hemmed in by foes, and it was clear they must make an opening or die like dogs in the wretched room.

"For your life, fire!" exclaimed the elder man.

Reuben had seen enough of the roughs not to hesitate longer, and as Halpine led the way their weapons began to crack steadily.

A terrible tumult ensued, for the roughs were not at all reluctant to engage in the exchange of lead, but the two men had the advantage of knowing friend from foe and they pushed steadily toward the window.

At times it seemed to Rube that others were helping them, but in the uproar everything was uncertain, and just as their revolvers were emptied they reached the window.

For a moment escape seemed certain, but just then the crowd hurled themselves forward and the strife became hand-to-hand.

Several times Rube saw a chance to escape, but he remembered Zella and did not turn until, dashed back by the very force of numbers, he went crashing through the window without any effort on his part. Narrowly escaping a severe fall he recovered his balance just as several other men came leaping through the opening and to his side.

He had slipped a cartridge into his revolver; but the sight of Halpine reassured him.

"Come, old man, away from here, or you are doomed," said one of the strangers, catching him by the arm.

"Zella!" cried Halpine; "I will not leave without her. She is captured!"

"It is death for us all to stay. Leave her for now, and we will rescue her later. We will help her; I swear it!"

Just then a bullet whistled past them, and it became so evident that they would soon have the entire lot of roughs at their heels, that Halpine yielded, and they glided away in the darkness.

Rube Redtop had resolved to cling to the fortunes of the man who had met misfortune in his service, and as they moved off he closely scanned the two strangers who made up the quartette.

Both had the appearance and motions of young men, but in the darkness little more was to be told, though it seemed that they had joined forces with the smaller party in good faith.

Behind them arose the angry yells of the roughs, who had plainly been thrown from the scent for the time being.

CHAPTER III.

WHERE IS ZELLA?

HALPINE did not go far. He had left his daughter in the hands of the roughs, and though he realized the importance of taking care of himself, he did not intend to rest in idleness.

"Enough of this!" he said, suddenly pausing.

"I am going back for my daughter."

"I am with you," said Redtop Rube.

"And I," added each of the others.

Halpine looked at them keenly.

"I don't know either of you," he said. "You backed my cause in the saloon, and I thank you; but it's a strange fashion for Torpedo Gulch."

"We don't belong here, and we follow a fashion of our own. We're cowboys from Texas, come here to hunt for gold. We're young, I acknowledge, but we know how to use our sixes, and we are with you in this game. I'm called Brown Ben, and my friend is Jack Silver."

The voice of the cowboy had a manly ring which impressed Halpine strongly.

"I'd like your aid till I get my poor Zella out of the hands of those fiends, but I tell you fairly that you risk your life in bucking against them. There isn't a harder place in Arizona than this same town."

"We never show the white feather in a good cause, and in this we're with you clean through. Ain't we, Jack?"

"Clean through," replied Jack tersely.

"We are four resolute persons," said Rube, with emphasis, "and such a force may do a good deal of execution. Let us lose no time, but at once move to rescue Miss Halpine. Lead the way, sir, and we will follow."

"Correct!" said Brown Ben, "and I opine if Redtop Rube, as they see fit to call you, gets at them in dead earnest, he'll spread himself so that they'll weep. What say, Jack?"

"They'll weep," agreed that young man.

By this time all were striding toward Bel-dick's saloon, led by Halpine. They had re-

loaded their revolvers, and it was arranged that if they could rescue Zella they should at once flee from the village never to return.

None of them had anything to leave in the way of valuables except Halpine, and as his gold was cached, he could return for it at some future time. The cabin he had erected amounted to nothing.

Pursuit had been made after their flight, but as it was not a promising undertaking it had soon been abandoned, and the saloon was as quiet as usual as they approached it.

Halpine stopped his allies a few yards away and then went forward to reconnoiter. He returned at the end of five minutes.

"They are all there, and Zella is with them," he said, in an unsteady voice. "They have bound her to a post and are now engaged in looking to their wounds. She is for the time left in peace, but I could see that young ruffian, Sam Lefferts, look at her as he cared for Tru-fant's hurt and it made my blood chill."

"What's your plan?" Rube tersely asked.

"Go boldly in and demand her," said Brown Ben.

"Useless!" uttered Halpine, sadly. "All of you are strangers in Torpedo Gulch, you do not know these fiends as I do. I tell you they know no mercy."

"I begin to understand them," said Rube, "and I see, too, how we must deal with them. I see they have their lights going again, but it will be easy to put them out. I propose that we do this and then make a dash for Miss Zella. The roughs will not for a moment dream that we would be so rash as to venture back, and in that very fact lies our hope of success."

"Right you are," said Brown Ben, "and you can depend on us to the death, can't they, Jack?"

"To the death," replied the second cowboy.

Halpine was silent for a moment, for though he was willing to risk his life for Zella, it seemed like madness to venture among that crowd.

"Time is fleetin'," added Ben.

"I can see no other way," muttered Halpine.

"Then let us try that, by all means," said Rube somewhat impatiently. "A bold dash will often do wonders, as I myself know."

The remark settled it. The young stranger had a way of making others think as he did, and Halpine was so far impressed that he asked him to take the lead.

Rube was not at all reluctant. These people had met their trouble through Halpine's mistaken idea that he—Rube—needed help, and he was resolved to see them safely through, while he was well aware that the only way to accomplish the work was to strike at once, and with a vim which should carry all before it.

The young leader led his small force to where they could view the interior of the saloon and quickly formed his plans.

"You," he said, addressing the cowboys, "must go to the rear of the place, and the moment I shoot out the lights, open a rapid fire with your revolvers, which will make them think the point of attack is there, and, under cover of this feint, Halpine and I will slip in and secure the girl. I suppose you've heard a Comanche yell?"

"Right you are."

"Well, when you hear it again, just draw off and make for the front of the shanty. You may see us by the way, but in any case make for the hills to the west. We must get out of the town."

His systematic plan pleased every one, and the cowboys hastened to their station.

Rube Redtop had been furtively scanning the captive girl. Slightly younger than himself, she had a well-developed figure, and a face so fair and refined that his resolution to aid her received fresh strength.

"Are you ready to follow?" he asked, turning to his companion.

"All ready," Halpine firmly answered.

Rube raised his revolver. Two dim lights had been placed side by side, as was necessary to get any degree of light, and he felt fully capable of extinguishing them.

Crack! crack!

Two reports sounded almost as one, and amid a fresh rattling of glass the room was again plunged in darkness.

Almost at the same moment the second fell in pieces, Rube bounded through the window like a cat, and, without waiting to see Halpine beside him, glided toward the captive girl. The room seemed to have been turned into a veritable menagerie. The roughs, long accustomed to have everything their own way, were in the last stage of fury, and amid their shouts and

curses the movements of the young champion were not easily detected.

He reached the side of Zella safely.

"Have no fear; I am a friend!" he whispered in her ear. "Follow me and you shall be saved."

While he spoke his knife was busy and her bonds fell away. He saw some one by his side, and, recognizing Halpine, joined their hands.

"Hasten away!" he said, in the same business-like manner. "Don't stop to think of the door; use the window, if possible, and I will guard your retreat."

The elder man had impulsively folded the girl in his arms, but as Rube gently pushed them both, he put sentiment aside and moved away.

There had been a general call for more lights, and when Beldick assured them he had nothing of the kind the wrath of the roughs broke loose and they turned their curses upon him.

One man, however, did not fail to suspect the meaning of this fresh demonstration, and as Redtop Rube turned away he heard Sam Lefferts's voice from near the post:

"Ther gal is gone! Howlin' Hannah, this hyar is a riot. Hyar, you fellers, scatter an' hold ther fort. Don't let a man er woman leave ther room. Five dollars ter him who delivers Redtop Rube inter my hands!"

His words stirred up the roughs, but trouble was already afoot. Halpine and Zella suddenly found their way barred, and a rough voice arose:

"Hyar they be—hyar's ther gal! Freeze on ter her!"

The fellow himself tried to carry out his plan, but Halpine knew that only one course could save them, and he had nerved himself to the work.

His ready revolver arose, a flash followed, and down went the rough with a shock audible all over the room. Then, with one arm clasped about Zella, the desperate father sprang forward, striking right and left with his clubbed revolver.

Rube saw where he was needed and sprang into the thick of the fray. They were surrounded by the crowd, but once more they had the advantage of knowing friend from foe, and the window was reached by a gallant spurt. Once more the roughs were learning that they had aroused a bad enemy when they molested the young stranger, who had been so quiet until forced into trouble.

"Quick—jump through!" said Rube, and Halpine obeyed, as all the youth's friends seemed obliged to do.

He leaped out in safety and turned for Zella, but Rube had not allowed any time to go to waste. He had swung the girl outside by a powerful effort, and even as Halpine wheeled she was set on her feet beside him.

"Run!" added Rube: "I'll cover your retreat."

He did not by any means intend to remain in the room to do it, but as the last word passed his lips a hand fell upon his collar and he was jerked back several feet.

"Shoot ther critter!"

"Kill him!"

"Git a rope!"

So shouted the roughs, but Redtop Rube had no intention of being thus served. He knew the name of Torpedo Gulch at last, and, setting his teeth, he plunged into their midst as he would among wolves seeking his blood.

The saloon had become a perfect pandemonium, and as several fights had been started here and there because of senseless quarrels in the dark, it seemed as though the Gulch would be considerably depopulated before the morning sun arose.

But would Rube Redtop be among the survivors?

CHAPTER IV.

TROUBLE CONTINUES.

RUBE was well aware that if he escaped at all it must be done quickly, and as he could not very well face a score of hard fighters alone he resorted to stratagem. While the roughs were endeavoring to get at him in the darkness he quietly changed his position, and then, leaving them to fight among themselves, slipped out of the room.

His little trick had been planned and executed with equal neatness, and once outside he hastened to look for Halpine and his daughter.

Hurrying around the corner of the building he look all around, but they were invisible. Just then Brown Ben and Jack Silver, who had done their own work well, came to his side, and the exchange of a few words established the

fact that the fugitives must have gone in a westerly direction.

"I think we are all right if we make haste," said Rube. "Let's get away from those howling fiends."

They hurriedly left the place and started along among the cabins, but not more than a hundred feet had been passed when Ben stumbled and nearly fell over something in his path.

"Hallo! here's a man!" he said. "Yes, and—hold on there; 'tis old Halpine!"

The announcement brought the party to a sudden halt, and Rube turned back in surprise. Sure enough, Halpine lay there, perfectly insensible, and, it at first seemed, lifeless.

Rube tore open his shirt and felt of his heart. "Only stunned, but some one must have given him an ugly blow."

"This complicates matters," said Ben.

"I reckon it does, for the question now arises: Where is Zella?"

It was one none of them could answer, but there was room for the gravest fears. Father and daughter had started together, and now the former was found as described and Zella had entirely disappeared.

"They've got her again," said Ben mournfully.

"I believe they have, although I don't think she has been taken to the saloon. We must revive Halpine and learn what has occurred. Wait, there may be water in this shanty; I'll go in and see."

As there was no door to oppose him he was soon inside, but the darkness was so great he could see nothing. He had just struck a match when there was a renewed tumult outside. Revolver shots sounded, mixed with shouts, and as he sprang to the door his arm was seized by Brown Ben.

"Git up and dust!" exclaimed he, hurriedly.

He had time to say no more, for just as Rube saw a solid mass of men around where Halpine lay they rushed toward them in such numbers that even Rube thought it wise to retreat.

For the time, at least, they could do nothing for their friend, and it was not likely he would be killed while insensible, so it behooved them to look to themselves.

We need scarcely say that it was not hard for three active young fellows like them to do this. The darkness was in their favor, and, after dodging rapidly among the shanties for a few minutes, they found themselves beyond the limits of the village, and free from pursuit.

They paused where the western hills came down in a bold descent to the level on which stood the infant "city."

"Well, I reckon this here is a lively town, Jack."

It was Brown Ben who spoke, and his taciturn partner answered as usual.

"A right lively town."

"See here," added Rube, "we want to decide on our course of action at once. We are all strangers to this town and its rough citizens, but we have got mixed up with its affairs, and I for one am bound to see the matter through."

Both the cowboys announced that they were with him.

"Of course," he resumed, "Halpine can't live any longer inside this place, but he don't want to die there, either. He and his daughter are in trouble, and I move we see them through, as I said before."

"I'm with you, and so's Jack."

"Remember, we are to fight the whole population."

"So much the better. We'll give 'em an idea of how we do business in Texas. We make you captain, Redtop Rube, and in your lead we'll follow."

Before this honor could be accepted or declined, the sound of vociferous cheering from near Beldick's saloon was borne to their ears.

"Reckon somebody's making a speech," said Ben.

He spoke lightly, but Rube took a different view of the matter. The roughs were pleased about something, and whatever it was, must be unfavorable to the cause he wished to defend.

He gave his views, and the trio unanimously agreed that they ought to return.

Very little time was consumed in gaining a position where they could see what was being done; still less was necessary to understand all.

From the upper window of Beldick's building a timber had been run out, and they were then engaged in making it fast, and in arranging a rope which dangled down toward a man who could be none other than Halpine.

"Great Cicero!" exclaimed Brown Ben, "they're going to hang him!"

"Shall we allow it?" demanded Rube.

"Well, seein'g's how there are at least thirty men in the gang, I doubt if we can help it; but we can, at least, wade in and try."

"I have a plan," said Rube, quickly. "My horse is in the stable behind the saloon, and with it are other animals. I move we all mount, and then dash into the crowd and try to carry Halpine off."

It was a bold scheme, since they, brave as they were, counted but three, and the roughs were ten times that number; but he had spoken to just the right persons for the venture. The cowboys had seen too many dashes among the Comanche braves of Texas to fear the Arizona roughs.

They had no time to waste and with rapid steps they proceeded toward the stable. No one was there to oppose them, and three horses were soon bridled and led out. Each youth had taken his own, though Brown Ben looked longingly at some of the others that seemed superior to his own strong but ungainly animal.

Back toward the crowd they then went, where they found the roughs prepared for the last act in the drama. The timber had been secured and the rope adjusted to Halpine's neck, and in a minute more he would be dangling in air.

Redtop Rube spoke sharply to his followers, and then, riding abreast, they dashed toward the crowd.

In the excitement of the moment they were not seen until close at hand, and then, as the roughs gave sudden attention, the gallant trio burst into ear-splitting yells not discreditable to Comanche braves.

The bravest man in the world has no desire to be trampled under the feet of a horse, and the first rank parted before their rush as they spurred toward the prisoner.

Just then a loud voice arose commanding the roughs to fire, and the boy pards waited no longer. Right and left they blazed away, though, agreeably to Rube's orders, they fired high, hoping to frighten rather than kill their enemies.

The leader had rode with a knife held in his teeth, and as he reached Halpine's side he suddenly stooped, cut his bonds and raised him to his horse by a powerful effort.

Then, if not before, the roughs understood what was afoot, and amid angry yells they opened fire.

It was a critical moment for the young men, but they did not falter; their plans had been previously arranged and they held to them grimly.

With their lives at stake they wasted no mercy, and, still urging on their horses, sent several well-aimed shots into the crowd before them, while the cowboys nearly split the air with their Comanche yells.

Luckily, their horses were fiery-spirited and not inclined to be caught by the bit, and amid all this miniature war they swept through and down the main street of the town.

Halpine had been gallantly rescued.

"Who is hurt?" demanded Rube.

"I've got a lump o' lead in my arm, but I reckon it ain't worth speaking of," replied Brown Ben.

And that was the only wound received, though not one of the party but could show a bullet-hole in his clothes.

"We must leave Torpedo Gulch and take to the hills," said Rube, looking back at their fading pursuers.

"But Zella—where is she?" demanded Halpine.

"Now, you have me. What happened after you left me?"

"Several men sprang from behind a shanty and attacked me so suddenly that before I could successfully resist, or even recognize them, I was beaten down. I saw Zella seized, and I have no doubt but that she is in the hands of the roughs."

"I have an idea that she was not taken to the saloon. Did you see Sam Lefferts when you were under the gallows?"

"No."

"Did he ever show any fancy for her in the past?"

"Yes; and it was because of that I was going to leave Torpedo Gulch."

"Then it's my opinion she is Sam's prisoner. Where would he be likely to take her?"

"To the saloon; that's his head-quarters."

"I don't believe she is there, and if she is, we can't get her to-night. War is formally declared between them and us, and we can't fool them any further just now. Mr. Halpine, I'm afraid you'll have to let this matter rest until to-morrow."

"I dare not! Zella must not remain among those scoundrels."

"Your remarks are all right in theory," said Brown Ben; "but you forget that we're on the weak side, and that the enemy holds the fort. Just hold over till to-morrow, old man, and we'll see you right through the game, if the bank bu'sts, won't we, Jack?"

"Through the game," echoed Mr. Silver, with more than usual fervor.

"You can depend on us all," added Rube.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACK REGULATORS' PROCLAMATION.

By this time the last cabin of the village had been passed, and as all sign of pursuit had ceased, they rode slowly up the gulch which led to the rocky fastnesses which hemmed the Gulch in on three sides.

Due deliberation convinced Halpine that his young allies were right; it would be madness to venture near the roughs again, and he only wondered that they had escaped so well. Rare indeed were the cases where people escaped the teeth of the Gulch tigers.

Zella's fate must for the time remain in doubt. He shuddered as he thought of her, but as nothing could be done it was as well to maintain an outward calmness.

"We must now look to ourselves somewhat," said Rube. "We shall be sought early in the morning, and we should have some place where we can defend ourselves against any force they may bring."

"That is the easiest thing of all," replied Halpine. "There are many caves among these hills, and I have long had one in view as a precaution against this very trouble. It is large, easily defended, and so far as I know, unknown to any other person. In it there is ample room for our horses and ourselves."

"Let us go there by all means. We don't know how long a pull we have against those hounds."

"I wish I had twenty cowboys here!" Brown Ben uttered.

No one answered, but Redtop Rube fell into deep thought. He had taken an interest in Zella Halpine, and as the troubles of the two, father and daughter, were primarily to be traced to himself, it was his duty to help them. In doing this, they must work squarely against Torpedo Gulch, which was believed to be solid for the opposition, and four men could not hold a town.

He had a plan in connection with all this, but it was not then time to mention it.

Halpine led the way to the cave. Difficult of access and easy to defend, it was spacious and well-suited to their purpose, while the dry air of Arizona did not admit of that disagreeable dampness one finds in such places in more northerly regions.

The remainder of the night passed uneventfully, the members of the little party taking turns on guard. Morning found them in good condition, but the fact was forced upon them that they lacked food both for themselves and horses.

"We must skip breakfast," said Rube coolly, "and then if we succeed at the Gulch, we'll feast at noon. What's your plan?" he added, addressing Halpine.

"I shall now risk all, and go to the village," was the firm reply.

"I'll accompany you, and let our friends remain here. Of course we go in a peaceful role."

While they were preparing for departure, Brown Ben came to Rube's side.

"Better keep an eye on the old man," he said warningly. "He is that stirred up that he has lost all caution, and will run his head into some trouble and get sent over the range if you don't look wild."

"That's just what I intend to look out for," said Rube quietly.

Whatever prudence Halpine might usually have had was no longer in force; anxiety for Zella had made him really incapable of governing himself.

He had, however, begun to obey all Rube's directions promptly, and he was not leaning on a brittle reed.

Leaving the cave they started toward the village, and Halpine so far aroused as to take due precautions and lead the way where no danger would be likely to be found.

All seemed as quiet as usual though, and it was not until they gained an elevated place and looked down on the village that they saw any sign of life.

Torpedo Gulch bore no marks of the trouble of the previous night. Lying calmly beneath

the hot sun, the shanties glimmered as usual, and a few lone pedestrians trod her irregular streets—'twas the usual picture, as Halpine soon saw.

While they were considering their next move, they saw a horseman ride out of Beldick's stable and start toward the western hills. Usually this would not have created a ripple in their minds, but as matters were then situated they at once became interested in the lone rider.

Possibly his business in some way concerned them. This theory was advanced by Halpine, and Rube smiled grimly.

"We will make it concern us," he said. "This is just the chance we desire. From this man we may learn the exact situation at the Gulch, and what has become of Miss Zella."

The elder man caught at the idea, and as the rider approached the hills they proposed to receive him. His errand seemed wrapped in mystery, for though he was making for a place called Thunder Pass, it was one which finally ended in the mountain fastnesses and horses had seldom trod its limits.

Before the stranger reached the rocky region our two friends had ambushed themselves in the pass, and as he rode forward he was no longer unknown. Halpine announced that he was a friend of Sam Lefferts and named Tom Rose.

As soon as he entered the pass he began to look from side to side and their suspicions seemed confirmed, but, just before reaching them, a look of satisfaction crossed his face and he halted and slid from his horse.

Just before him and only a few feet from the ambushed men, the cliff arose for forty feet in a form unusually regular; and toward this rock Tom went, leaving his horse where he stood.

He was now in the power of the ambushers, but they had become interested in his movements and waited to see what he would do, their uncertainty being very much increased by the sight of a small pail he bore in one hand.

Once at the base of the cliff, however, he went to work with the skill of a professional bill-poster and on the face of the rock pasted the following notice:

"\$100 REWARD!"

"The above sum will be paid for the capture of one Reuben Redtop, alias Redtop Rube, a noted desperado who is wanted by the men of Torpedo Gulch. The money will be paid and no questions asked to whoever delivers the outlaw to justice."

Article 2. Moses Halpine is informed that his daughter, Zella, is in the hands of the Black Regulators of the aforesaid town, and that she will be held until Redtop Rube is surrendered. Halpine is cautioned not to enter the Gulch until the outlaw is secured, as he will be shot at sight. It is hoped that he will know enough not to protect Redtop at the expense of his daughter.

"SAM LEFFERTS,
"Captain of Regulators."

Such was the laborious proclamation read by the two men in ambush, and it seemed to arouse all the antagonism of Rube. The bill-poster had just finished his work when he had a little surprise.

"Tom Rose!"

He wheeled abruptly at hearing his name spoken and had a very discouraging view of a pair of revolvers which covered his breast, while Mr. Redtop looked sternly along the barrels.

"You are one of the men who wants Redtop Rube. I take it. Allow me to say that 'noted desperado' is here and you can at once proceed to take him back to camp!"

Rose heard, but he gave no signs of joy. On the contrary his face had changed color somewhat, and instead of putting his hands to his revolvers as a doughty Westerner is supposed to do, he put both before his face with the palms forward.

"Don't shoot! don't shoot!" he cried, quickly, "I ain't armed."

Rube laughed mockingly.

"Under what head do you class those six-shooters in your belt?" he asked.

"Oh! they ain't loaded," said Tom, looking very honest.

"You put fresh cartridges in them just before you reached the hills, you confounded liar!"

"I cave," was the meek reply, "I am heeled, but I swar I don't want ter buckle onto you. I got one from your fives in ther saloon last night, and I don't hanker fur another. I'm hyar ter put up ther notice, es you see, but that ends my work an' ef you please I'll amble back to ther Gulch."

"Don't hurry, Thomas. What's been done there?"

"They's held a meetin' an' formally did what that notice says."

"And so I am outlawed, with a price on my head?"

"Yas."

"Comforting, that; very composing to the mind. But, see here; what of Zella Halpine?"

"Sam Lefferts has got her prisoner."

"To hold till I am caught?"

"Ye-es."

"You chew your words. Why? Has Sam a double game? Is it all a trick on his part? Perhaps—I've heard he once tried to win her for his wife—when he gets me he'll keep her, too."

"Oh! no, no!" protested Rose; but his very eagerness betrayed the fact that Rube had made a close guess.

Up to this point Halpine had kept out of sight, but he now emerged from the cover of the bowlder.

"See here, Tom Rose, I'm here, too, and I am not in a playful mood, either. Do those men intend to keep me out of Torpedo Gulch?"

"That's what Sam Lefferts says."

"What has he to do with it? Is he king of the Gulch?"

"Well, they've organized a band which they call the Black Regulators, 'cause every one wears a strip of black cloth round his left arm, an' they made Sam captain. He does rule in ther Gulch, jest now."

Halpine laughed sarcastically.

"A fine man he is for a Regulator. He had better regulate himself, first of all. Tom, where have they put my daughter?"

"I don't know, Mose."

"'Tis false. You know well enough, and though I won't ask too much of you, that much you shall tell. Where is Zella confined? Answer, or, by my life, I'll treat you as I would a wolf!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIVAL BANDS.

HALPINE'S eyes glowed with a light which startled Tom Rose, and he hurriedly raised his hands again.

"Hold on! hold on!" he cried, "I'll tell. Just give me a chance, and don't for mercy's sake chuck me full o' lead. She was kept in an ole cabin last night, somewhar at ther south end o' the village, but now she is in ther upper part o' Beldick's saloon, an' Sam has set five o' ther Regulators ter watch all ther time."

Redtop Rube burst into a mocking laugh.

"Sam goes mighty cautious, considering he is at the head of all Torpedo Gulch. I reckon he has had his wits stirred up a bit. See here, Tom Rose, it's my turn at a proclamation now. You tell Sam that if he don't meet me at this spot, one hour before dark this evening, I will make the Gulch howl worse than Rome ever did, while of him I won't leave a landmark. Hear me, Tom—tell your Regulator captain to bring Zella Halpine here this evening. Will you do it?"

Rube spoke with more feeling than usual and the bill-poster went further into his boots than ever.

He had seen fighting in his day, but he didn't care to chip in with a human tornado. He spoke very meekly to the youth, and assured him all should be as he said, and then, greatly to his relief, he was allowed to ride away.

"Well, what now?" Rube abruptly asked.

Halpine started from deep thought.

"I suppose we may as well return to the cave."

"Exactly. Now, what hope have you of worsting Sam Lefferts and his gang?"

"We must worst them."

"That isn't the question. What are our chances? Let us abandon heroics for a while and come down to bed-rock."

"I'm afraid our show is poor," Halpine gloomily acknowledged.

"So I thought. How many men at the Gulch?"

"Fifty."

"All roughs?"

"Not quite. Three men I am sure are not of that stripe, and I think as many more would be glad to see harm come to the gang."

"Well it is clear to me that we must set up an opposition party. They have organized the Regulators; now let us organize a band of Vigilantes."

"Who will we get?"

"Probably half a dozen men from the town, and I know where to find enough more to run our number up to near twenty. Brown Ben has confessed that he and his companion are members of a party of twelve who have come to Arizona from Texas—all ex-cowboys—for the purpose of finding a new and rich gold region. He told me this morning that the party would

like nothing better than to play outlaw for a while, live in the mountains and make things warm for the Regulators, as they call themselves."

"Will this work?" Halpine asked, more hopefully.

"It's our business to make it work. As near as I size Torpedo Gulch it is a place which needs purifying. I don't believe in letting a gang of toughs hold forth as those fellows do, and if I can do anything to upset them, I'm going to do it."

Halpine put out his hands.

"By George! you're a brick!" he declared. "You put me to shame, for you have more energy at eighteen than I have at forty-five. You teach me a lesson and I'll take it seriously; from this time I'll be a rock instead of a reed."

They shook hands over the understanding and then hastily returned to the cave. It was desirable to get the cowboys to the scene as soon as possible if they were coming at all, and Rube wished to see Brown Ben.

That young man literally jumped at the offer. The idea of wild, mountain life in a resolute band just suited him, and when he left to look up his absent friends, Jack Silver laconically remarked that when the footing became good Ben would make his horse "fly."

Nothing of interest occurred at the cave until the middle of the forenoon, when they were agreeably surprised by the return of Ben and his reinforcement. He had found them much sooner than was to be expected, and every man had hailed the chance to join the "Vigilantes."

Rube was not long in deciding that good material had come to his band. Rough, the cowboys were; but not one seemed vicious, and though Brown Ben had made an explanation, they required another from those at the cave before they would make any promises, and their scruples removed Rube's last doubt.

As a result, they were formally enlisted as a beginning of the band which was to oppose the Black Regulators, and though Halpine was the only one in the lot who had seen twenty-one years, it was a resolute party.

Rube had named Halpine for captain, but that man emphatically declared that the younger man himself was fittest of all for the office, and when a vote was taken he was unanimously elected, with Ben for his lieutenant.

It was a strange unanimity when the nature of young men and the fact that Rube was a stranger are considered; but he had a way of winning men when he tried and all hailed "Redtop Rube" as prince of the Vigilantes.

When once these preliminaries were settled Rube gave attention to another matter. He had asked Sam Lefferts to meet him in Thunder Pass at sunset, and as he had an idea that young rascal might try some trick he resolved to hold the winning cards in case of a crisis.

Thus it was that, at the end of an hour, the little Vigilante band was stationed near the rendezvous, well armed, but concealed from casual view.

A little before the time Rube had named, Sam appeared in the pass, walking from the town as unconcerned as though peace reigned all along the hills.

Rube had been attentively watching, and just as his rival reached the place of meeting, he might have been seen coming from the opposite direction.

Sam's face remained calm, but in his eyes was a glitter which indicated that he intended to make the meeting something more than a conference; while the absence of the revolvers from his belt, where he always kept them, might have been a sign of peace but did not so inform the young Vigilante.

The Regulator remained silent as they came face to face, and Rube, pointing to the notice posted on the cliff by Tom Rose, spoke quietly:

"This is a very appropriate place for us to talk."

"You'll find me ready ter talk, an' them's still my sentiments. Torpeder Gulch has spoke in a big voice an' she don't shake her record."

"By which you mean that I am still an outlaw."

"Yas; an' so ter stay till you stretch hemp."

"Go away; you can't be serious."

"I am all o' that," said Lefferts, savagely.

"Well, we will speak of this later. First, let us talk of Zella Halpine. I suppose she is still your prisoner."

"Right, my young philosopher, right."

"And you will yield her when I surrender?"

"Yes."

"What do you want of me?"

"Want ter give ye decent burial arter hangin' ye," Sam growled.

"Go away; you wouldn't really dig a hole in this sun, would ye?"

"No; but I would in ther ground."

"Good! I owe you one, Samuel. Well, you see I can't think of surrender; I've no wish to stretch hemp, as you playfully express it, so I shall have to decline. But, in what other way can we trade? Of course the girl isn't to blame for our muss, and I really think she ought to be set free."

"Oh! do ye? Wal, now, that's queer; I thought you was jokin'. Wal, she can't go free till you are cooped in her place."

"Why should you persecute a girl?"

"That's my business. It's enough for you that I've got ther king-row, an' that I mean ter keep it."

"You're fixed in this resolution?"

"I am."

"Well, it's a cowardly piece of business."

"What?" shouted Sam.

"I say that any one who will persecute a girl to gain revenge on some other party is a coward and rascal. Unless you free Zella Halpine you are both of these."

Sam's face had grown very red, and when he would have spoken only a gasping sound came from his throat. He was amazed that any one should dare to talk so plainly to him, and his overpowering wrath prevented a verbal reply.

One way was, however, open to him.

From out his pockets he snatched his revolvers, and murder was in his eye, but Redtop Rube had been in close corners before and he did not waver or hesitate. One quick blow sent the first revolver flying several feet away, and then Sam's other hand was seized in an iron-like grasp. Baffled and angry he made a desperate effort to release it, but very much to his own surprise, he made no headway against that hold.

He gave up the struggle after a minute and looked at Rube with furious eyes. For years he had not been mastered—it was his reckless bravery and fighting qualities which had made men twice his own age elect him captain of the Regulators.

"Free my wrist, or, by the fiends, I'll kill you!" he hissed, madly.

"Try when you will, but I believe you will succeed no better then than now," was the cool reply.

"Beware!"

"Of whom?"

"Of me!"

"Oh! I'll take the risk. I see you are in a passion; but we are not now in Beldick's saloon, among your bravos. You wanted a row then, and got it, but if any doubts remain in your mind as to who is the best man, try me!"

This perfectly cool challenge was too much for Sam, and he lanced out his right fist in a heavy blow—struck, and then found himself lying on his back with Rube's foot on his chest. How it was done he never really knew, for the young Vigilante had moved like a flash.

Quickly, however, Sam uttered a whistle, and then from the cover of the rocks three of his men sprung into view and covered Rube with their revolvers.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST COLLISION.

SAM LEFFERTS looked to see his enemy quail in this new danger, but Redtop Rube remained provokingly calm.

"Hello!" quoth he, coolly; "here are some of your friends. Glad to see you, boys, for Samuel is not well; in fact, he seems to be quite sick."

"Let me up!" roared the Regulator, while his men seemed uncertain whether they ought to shoot or not.

"Will you be quiet if I do?"

"Yes, for I am going to take you to the Gulch. It would be poor satisfaction to wipe ye out hyer; once at ther Gulch, I'll make ye howl, an' keep Zella besides."

"Now you talk business. Up you get!"

Rube stepped back a little and Sam arose. There was murder in his heart, but above all arose his pride; he must hide the truth from his followers.

"Hal ha!" he said, with an unnatural laugh. "Quite a little episode, boyees. It war all did fur effect, fur I wanted ter see ther critter turn pale when you popped out."

"Got your wish, didn't you, Samuel? I look pale as a ghost, don't I?"

Rube laughed unconcernedly, and the Regulator was again stung to a fury.

"Fool!" he exclaimed, "you don't know ther

trouble you are in. You're as good as planted. Do ye see them revolvers?"

He pointed toward his nearest man, who had not lowered his weapons, but Rube answered as coolly as ever:

"I was just looking at them. Thirty-two calibers, ain't they?"

"You blamed blockhead! don't you see the the sled you are in? You are my prisoner, an' you're goin' to ther Gulch as sech—unless Job's finger slips an' you git a lump o' lead in your head."

"Even your rhyme don't take the rough-edge of horror off your remark, and I earnestly request your patient friend not to make a slip till the show is over. Act two now begins!"

Rube whistled in turn, and from the rocks at the other side of the narrow pass arose half a dozen of his Vigilantes, with rifles presented, while every boulder in the vicinity seemed to be surmounted by the same kind of an ornament.

"Your man is covering me," laughed Redtop Rube, "but my Vigilantes have the drop on the whole congregation!"

Sam Lefferts was never more surprised in his life. He had not suspected that Rube had more than three men for a following, but they seemed to spring from the very earth at his command.

"Job," added the master of ceremonies, "put up your pepper-boxes!"

Job quickly obeyed, but Sam's surprise began to give way to boiling wrath. Being no coward he was tempted to try to strike his enemy dead and take his chances, but he had an unpleasant fear that one of the riflemen would drop him before he could strike.

"It must by this time be clear to you that you are outwitted," continued Rube. "I dropped to your game and covered the ground first. I saw your men ambush themselves, but it just suited me. I wanted to show you that I am master, and I reckon I've done it."

"You dare not meet me in equal fight," said Sam.

For a moment Rube hesitated.

"I will not," he then said, firmly. "Other things go first, but I'll accommodate you some day. First of all, let me refer to that placard. You ordered it up?"

"Yes," was the defiant answer.

"Very good. Take it down!"

Lefferts changed expression but did not stir.

"Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear, but I'll be shot afore I tech it!"

"My man, you tried to bully me in the saloon, when you held the king-row, and I let you amble. Now I take pay for that insult and for your abuse of Zella Halpine. Take down the placard!"

Sam grew white with emotion. He knew he was wholly in the power of Redtop Rube, but the humiliation threatened was terrible to him.

"I'll die first!" he hissed.

"It's for you to choose, but I warn you I am in dead earnest. I give you just three minutes in which to decide."

All the jesting mood had gone from the young Vigilante, and his expression was enough to have cowed a man less brave. He called his nearest follower and bade him time the Regulator, and then silence fell over the crowd—that same silence observed when a crowd at a legal execution watches for the last act in the drama.

Sam Lefferts had grown pale under all his bronze. It was a terrible hour for him, for he saw that his pride must be dragged in the dust. For a moment he felt like defying the Vigilante and dying where he stood, but that would be too great a triumph for his enemy.

No; he would submit to this shame and live for vengeance.

Without another word he turned to the cliff and began tearing down the notice. Tom Rose had done his work well and the paper stuck closely, but Sam plucked away doggedly and piece after piece fell.

"That will do," said Rube, at length. "The rock looks as though a circus-manager had stepped on it, but it no longer calls for gore."

Lefferts turned back in silence, but his gaze rested on his rival's face with a terrible glare.

"You will see there is another band in the field," added Rube, quietly. "The Black Regulators need regulating, and that's why the Vigilantes are out to day. Their purpose is very simple, however. When Zella Halpine is safely delivered to her father, my men disappear and you can run Torpedo Gulch to suit yourself."

"If you want her, go an' get her!" snapped Lefferts.

"Excuse me, but I know a better way. You are my prisoner, and such you will remain until, by your orders, your men bring Zella here."

"They shall never do that!"

"Then you will never be free again. You must confess that I hold the king-row, just at present. I shall take you to the retreat of the Vigilantes, and there you stay until the Regulators cave."

Sam Lefferts felt like howling with rage, but he managed to keep himself within bounds. He looked at the grim young men around him, and, reading resolution in each face, saw how utterly helpless he was.

"We can't delay here," continued Rube, impatiently. "You will go to our retreat; your men can return to the Gulch. Have you any orders for them?"

"Yes," said Sam, fiercely. "Men, you've heard this rooster; now hear me. If any two-legged critter at Torpedo dar's take the gal from her room, I'll blow out his brains. I'll starve up there in their mount'ns afore I'll give an inch o' ground. Redtop Rube, your offer is declined; now run on your parade!"

The Vigilante chief accepted his ultimatum, and ordered the lesser villains to return to the village. They went, showing considerable relief, but glancing at Sam as though expecting something more from him.

He, however, kept his mouth firmly closed.

When they were gone, Rube directed his men to bind the hands of the prisoner, and when a bandage had been tied over his eyes, the return to the cave was begun.

Already it was growing dark, but they made such good use of their time, that their journey was soon finished and Sam confined in a small room off the larger one, with silent Jack Silver and another man for guards.

Around a glowing fire the Vigilantes prepared and ate their supper, at the same time discussing the future.

Redtop Rube, with his usual boldness, had formed a plan. He believed the Regulators would expect him to remain quiet and rely on his prisoner to bring them to terms, and he looked at the matter like a sagacious general.

To be successful in war, one must strike just where and when he is not expected.

Thus it was that he proposed a midnight dash into Torpedo Gulch, and his summary of the situation was all that was needed to arouse the cowboys to enthusiasm.

Excellent horsemen, they had seen so much of like life in Texas, that it was like a leaf from the old book.

At the appointed hour the party wound down the mountain, Halpine alone remaining at the cave. For this work Rube would have chosen Jack Silver, but the elder man was an indifferent horseman and, as Sam was left bound, nothing was to be feared from him.

When the Vigilantes arrived near the village a halt was made, and Brown Ben went forward to reconnoiter.

When he returned he reported all quiet except at Beldick's saloon, and the few men who remained there were likely to stay for hours, as they were deep in the mysteries of poker.

Rube was satisfied and no further time was lost. Down the main street they started at a moderate gallop, going in a double row with their leader a little in advance.

The miners were nearly all asleep, for the preceding night and day had given them little time for rest, and they were improving what seemed a good chance.

The little noise made by the Vigilantes did not arouse them, and almost as silently as specters the little band dashed up to Beldick's saloon.

Rube had selected four men to follow him, and as they came to a halt, they leaped from their saddles and strode in through the door.

Seven men, including the landlord, were present, and as they looked up to see who was seeking their classic retreat at that hour, they had a very discouraging view of a line of glittering revolvers which covered every man of them.

"Hands up!" ordered Captain Redtop in a clear voice. "Make one move toward your revolvers and we use ours. Hands up, every man!"

Consternation seized upon the gamblers. All of them had seen that first quarrel forced upon the young stranger, but his situation had changed materially since then, and their sand slipped rapidly away.

"Hol' on, hol' on!" cried Beldick, first of all. "I'm in proper posish."

He put up his arms and his example was followed by all. Redtop Rube held the ground just then, but the tigers' teeth were muffled, not drawn.

If he went through Torpedo Gulch in triumph he might call himself a lucky man.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SURPRISE FOR REDTOP RUBE.

THE Vigilante prince turned to Beldick as soon as he saw matters thus situated.

"Landlord," said he, "lead me to Zella Halpine."

"To Zella? Why she ain't here," said Beldick.

"Don't take the trouble to lie. I know she is, and you may as well cave. The Vigilantes hold the floor to-night and they ain't joking. You will produce the girl or I'll fire your old ranch and let you roast inside of it!"

Rube had no intention of doing such a barbarous thing, but his words produced the desired effect; they frightened Beldick nearly out of his boots.

"Hol' on!" he cried, "don't say that. I've caved; I'm knocked clean over the ropes an' outer ther ring; I don't put in my warble ag'in' yours at all, but when you've gone all over this hyar place, from top ter bottom, you'll see I am right."

Redtop believed he was lying and peremptorily ordered him to lead the way, but at that moment there came a revolver shot from outside the door, followed by a second and a third, and the chief wheeled about.

"Hold the crowd, boys!" he ordered, and then strode through the door.

He found only two of the band at their post, but the others were frisking about among the adjacent cabins.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Some critter took a few shots at us from the dark. Ther boyees are arter him."

"We have no time to lose; he will arouse the whole camp. Yes, they begin to pour out now. Here, Tom Austin, come with me!"

With these words Rube dashed back into the saloon, and when he ordered Beldick to lead the way to the upper part of the building there was that in his voice which compelled prompt obedience.

The landlord caught up a lamp and they ascended the ladder together, but as they reached the floor an awkward movement on Beldick's part sent the light crashing at their feet, leaving them in total darkness.

"It don't make no difference," said the man, hastily. "The girl is here and you shall have her."

"Be quick, then," the Vigilante peremptorily ordered, as a lively firing began outside the building.

Beldick tossed aside a wooden bar, threw open a door and spoke again.

"The girl is inside."

Before Rube could answer there was a rustle of female garments and some one ran straight into Rube's arms—a slight, girlish figure he was not slow to recognize as Zella Halpine.

"Oh! let me go, let me go!" she pleaded, as though she thought him an enemy. "My father will give you all the money you ask."

"Have no fear, Miss Zella," Rube hastily said. "I am not an enemy, but a friend, and I am here for the express purpose of rescuing you. You shall go to your father. Just follow me and you shall be saved."

She murmured a few words of thanks, which the young man scarcely heard. Instead, his ear was stretched to catch the sounds of strife outside. The firing had become brisk; it was plain the roughs were turning out in force; there was no time to lose.

He sprang toward the ladder, and raising the girl, carried her down bodily.

The saloon was in darkness, suggesting some new trouble, but one of his men spoke reassuringly.

"It's all right, cap'n; one o' them gamboliers upset the table, but we hold the fort. Have you got her?"

"Yes. Are the boys all here?"

"Yes."

"Then away we go. The whole village is awake, and we must escape while we can."

"Don't leave me!" uttered his fair companion; and Rube, remembering how his heart had palpitated at that first meeting, made a somewhat extravagant vow that the roughs should only reach her over his body.

When they emerged from the saloon it was seen that Brown Ben and his men were having a lively little fight; but though the roughs were numerous, they kept well away from the little band, and neither party was doing much damage in the darkness.

Rube sprang at once to his horse, and with the girl held in his arms was ready for departure.

"Attention, Vigilantes! Forward—charge!"

His voice rung out clearly, and with a sweep

and dash the ex-cowboys galloped directly toward their foes.

The latter were not cowards by any means, but a man must be pretty sure that a sacrifice is demanded before he will let a horse trample him under foot, and without exception they fell back and gave ample room.

Each party fired a few harmless shots, and then the Vigilantes shook off their rivals and went thundering through the village, the cowboys making the air quiver with their Comanche yells.

Some one chanced to see a horse, and as war had been formally declared, he was promptly confiscated and given to the girl; and thus the rescuers rode out of the village in triumph, not having lost a man and having no wounds of importance.

Redtop Rube would neglect no precautions, so the girl was placed in the center of the little party, while he himself rode at the head.

In this way the return was safely made, and when the hour was yet some distance from day, they re-entered their cave.

Rube had been thinking of the pleasant meeting between Halpine and his daughter, and as the place was quite dark, since only one torch was burning, he bade her remain silent for a while and, taking her hand, went toward the niche where the elder man and his prisoner had been left.

The former was not visible, nor did he answer to his name, and the chief seized the torch and swung it about to increase the blaze.

This act brought a surprise which speedily increased to fear; neither Halpine nor Sam Lefferts was visible. He called the former's name, once, twice, three times; but no answer was returned.

Rube turned toward the girl, his face very grave, and then almost staggered as a second surprise met him.

She was not Zella Halpine!

No wonder the young captain stared, for the possibility of such a mistake had not before occurred to him, and with parted lips he was for some time speechless. Then he started forward and seized her arm in a hold anything but gentle.

"What trick is this?" he demanded, harshly.

"Oh! Heaven save me!" she cried, shrinking back. "What have I done? Do you, too, turn against me? Oh! what is the matter?"

"Where is Zella Halpine?" he demanded.

"I don't know; nor do I know who she is. What are you blaming me for?"

"Because I am a fool, I reckon," thought Rube; and then aloud: "Don't you know Zella?"

"I do not. I think there was another woman at that dreadful house, but I never even saw her."

"And who are you?"

"My name is Ellice Norton, and I live at Gray Horse Bar. I was stolen by those men and confined in the house. I thought you had come as a friend, but I guess—I guess I was wrong."

She seemed on the point of bursting into tears, as women occasionally do, but Redtop Rube did not seem very much affected. Naturally somewhat suspicious, he could not get rid of the impression that there was a trick somewhere, absurd as it seemed; but he was not wholly proof against female beauty and his new acquaintance's unusually large share of it made him drop his harsh manner.

"We are the friends of all who are deserving," he quietly said, "and you are as safe as though at your own home. I am, however, greatly disappointed, for we went to Torpedo Gulch to rescue a certain person, and now I find our efforts unsuccessful."

"Was it the other girl?"

"I suppose so."

"I am sorry for you."

"I am sorry for her," said Rube, gloomily. "For myself, I have but one word—idiot! Boys, you see the blunder I have made and I frankly say I am not fit to lead you. I resign in favor of Brown Ben!"

"No, you don't!" cried that man, quickly. "Are you ter blame fur gettin' mixed on a girl you never see'd axcept in ther saloon onc't? I guess not. We are all sorry, but we don't blame ye. I say, three cheers fur Captain Rube Redtop!"

They were given with a will and the young leader saw that, right or wrong, the band was going to stand by him. He expressed his gratitude and then once more remembered the singular disappearance of Sam Lefferts and Halpine.

A thorough search of the cave failed to discover a sign of them, and Rube strongly suspected that the young villain had hoodwinked Halpine, and agreeing to surrender Zella, had lured him away from the cave.

"Yes," said Brown Ben, "and very likely the old man is by this time a prisoner at the Gulch. Well, let him go; he's done a pile of foolish things since we knew him, and if he would trust Lefferts he ought to get pulled in."

"Such folly is certainly inexcusable, even when we know it was his love for his daughter that sent him on such a dangerous road."

At this moment one of the hands came in from the outer air.

"I've found Halpine," he said, "but he'll never do any more work for the band, or get taken in by a rascal."

"Is he dead?" Rube demanded.

"That's the name for it. He lays outside with a knife-slash right through him."

And they found it even so. The unfortunate miner lay a hundred feet from the cave, and Rube's suspicions were confirmed. Beyond much doubt Sam Lefferts had used his tongue well and deceived his guard, and then, when once outside, he had seized his opportunity and killed him without warning.

The cowboys, practicable and sensible themselves, neither expressed or felt sympathy, for they strongly condemned the folly which had led to the tragedy; but Rube remembered Zella, and was a good deal depressed by Halpine's untimely end.

CHAPTER IX.

A BOLD UNDERTAKING.

REDTOP RUBE called his men together and made a brief speech. He pointed out very clearly the fact that the escape of Sam Lefferts would make their cave no longer a safe refuge. Lefferts would, of course, be able to guide the Regulators to the spot, and, outnumbered as they were, they would become practical prisoners; they might even have to fight hard to hold their quarters.

Such being the case, it was best to change to another cave if they could find one. With the death of Halpine went their last member who was acquainted with the mountain, and as they might not easily find this other refuge, it was well to hold to their present one until a better way was open.

The disgust expressed for Halpine's folly led the young leader to fear his men would vote to abandon their comrade; but when he pictured Zella's situation, deprived of her father and in Sam's hands, they solidly declared eternal devotion to her, and as lasting an enmity against Torpedo Gulch.

All this pleased Rube greatly, and he then proceeded to interview Miss Ellice Norton.

"What do you know of Lefferts?" he abruptly asked.

"Simply that he came to Gray Horse Bar often and forced his attentions upon me. I disliked him, and would have nothing to do with him, and then I was stolen by his men. He confined me in the old house where you found me, and nearly frightened me to death by swearing that I should marry him."

All this looked candid enough, and in keeping with Lefferts's nature, and Rube told himself it was mere obstinacy which still made him doubt the girl, for doubt her he did.

"Where is this Gray Horse Bar?" he asked.

"About fifty miles west of here."

Rube pondered. Had the distance been under twenty he would have sent her away at once, but it would be impossible to detach a part of his men at such a time.

"Well," he said, slowly, "if you can get along with our humble accommodations we will try to see you safely through your difficulty. Of course we must all remain inside the cave until the matter is decided."

His words conveyed a hint which Miss Ellice did not fail to understand, but she calmly answered that she was satisfied.

Rube directed Brown Ben to arrange a place for her occupancy and then ostensibly retired to his own nook for the night, or, rather for the two hours of darkness which remained.

Really, he had wholly different plans, and as soon as his men became quiet he secretly left the cave, well armed, and with his face toward Torpedo Gulch descended the mountain as fast as was possible.

His mission was one of danger at the best, but he was resolved to risk all. His mistake in regard to the girls chagrined him more than he could tell; he had taken his brave followers into peril without any perceptible gain, and he

was resolved to make a second attempt and risk no one except himself.

"Perhaps I am as foolish as poor Halpine, but I don't believe they will expect another move to-night."

It was half an hour later when he reached the cabins of the Gulch. Nothing could be more quiet than the whole place, not a light was visible, and not a sound arose on the air.

The young Vigilante glided along like a shadow. He was prepared for any emergency, and as this quietness might be but a mask such a state of affairs was possible; but he reached the side of the Beldick saloon without trouble.

Dark and silent was the whole building, but had he seen less of the place he might have hesitated before entering. As it was, he thought only of the means.

Knowing that Beldick slept on the lower floor, he searched several minutes for a ladder, but such a thing being little used in the town he was unsuccessful, though he did happen on a plank by means of which he knew he could enter.

"Help me up," he said, addressing this novel ladder, "and as for the coming down, leave me to shift for myself, as somebody said when he was to be hung."

It was not hard to reach the second-story window, and once there he cautiously pushed it up and paused to listen. All remained silent and, going further, he passed through and stood on the floor.

He was now fairly in the den of the tiger, and the chance that the beast was asleep did not look very large when he remembered that Tom Rose had said that Sam kept five men over her as a constant guard. Rube was sure this was an exaggeration, but the chance of her being left wholly alone was small indeed.

He moved cautiously toward the room in which he was sure she must be confined, but only a few steps had been taken when there was a stir near his feet and something arose and grappled with him.

It was a startling interruption, but he was equal to the emergency, and as he recognized the hands of a man he was not long in moving his own until they closed around the fellow's throat.

A desperate struggle then began, and one which Rube felt sure would arouse the people of the house. His adversary was a muscular man, and, though he lacked Rube's agility, a hard one to conquer, while it was necessary to retain a firm hold on his throat to prevent an alarm.

Back and forth they went, while every moment seemed sure to bring Beldick to the ladder, but Rube was not disposed to delay the end.

Catching his antagonist by a cunning lock, he flung him around with such force that after striking against a post, he settled down and lay quite still. His head had received a thump which placed him *hors du combat*, at least for a while.

Satisfied that this was so, Rube hurried to the door where he believed Zella to be, still moving in the dark.

A bar held the door, but it was soon removed and he passed within.

"Who is there?"

The challenge arose quickly and in plain alarm, but it was also clear that it was that of a woman—of the very one he sought, unless Rube was mistaken.

"Hush!" he said warningly. "I have come to take you from this den if, as I suspect, you are Zella Halpine."

"I am she," returned the girl, with a sudden change of voice. "Are you the young man I saw in the saloon?"

"Yes."

"And my father?"

"He is in trouble, but your own life depends on your leaving here."

"I will go at once."

She glided to his side, and he saw she was all ready for flight. Their hands met and he felt a thrill of exultation, but there was no time to lose. Delay in that house would ruin both; the only wonder was that all had gone well up to that time.

He led her across the floor to the window, but there he would have been in a dilemma had not she declared her ability to descend and proved the fact by going.

Hope began to burn brightly, but the flame had a severe draught as, half-way through the window, a hand closed over Rube's ankle and, though all remained silent above, he was held as in a vise.

Desperately he endeavored to wrench away,

but the only result was that he lost his balance and, falling head downward, was in another moment swinging by one leg, still held by his unknown captor.

The situation, comical as it might seem under some circumstances, was decidedly serious. Quiet as the town was, it would take but little to stir it up.

Rube's clutching hands encountered nothing except the top of the plank, and he was getting discouraged when a worse phase was given the case. There was a flash above him, a heavy report, and a bullet whizzed near his ears.

His unknown enemy was coolly holding him by one foot, while he endeavored to blow out his brains with his unoccupied hand.

Crack!

A second shot was fired, but Rube dodged at the flash, and from that reason or some other, avoided injury, while the attempt at butchery suddenly reminded him that he, too, carried firearms.

With a quick movement he drew a revolver, and pointing it upward just as the double click from the unknown heralded a third shot, the youth pulled the trigger.

There was a flash, a report, a loosening of the hold on Rube's ankle, and he shot down.

Quick as a flash it occurred to him that to drop that way was to break his neck, and his hands again seized the plank. He whirled over in the air, and wrenched his arms severely; but breaking his fall, was soon on his feet.

He was none too soon.

Loud shouts were sounding here and there, showing that the firing was reawakening Torpedo Gulch, and Rube grasped the hand of the frightened girl.

"We've got to run for it!" he said. "Don't be alarmed, for I think we are sure to succeed. Come with me!"

He had laid out his course before entering the house, in case just such a dilemma should be forced upon him, and with rapid steps they sped among the cabins to a place of safety.

The roughs were arousing like bees from their hives, and when it is remembered how lately they had settled down to peaceful rest, it is not strange they awoke in a most ugly mood.

Luckily for the fugitives, one of the crowds saw fit to mistake a neighbor for an enemy, and his shot was the signal for a brisk serenade, which was soon drawing all to a common point.

Rube had just begun to feel at his ease, when he was hailed by a man who came running after them.

"Hold on, Redtop!" said this person. "I'm your friend and not your foe, and if you want half a dozen true men to join your band I'll get them for you."

"His name is Lane; he is father's best friend," Zella interpolated.

The Vigilante remembered what Halpine had said, and as more men were really needed in the band, he bade Mr. Lane seek him at Thunder Pass the next day for a talk.

He had not paused while speaking, and by the time he had finished the village was passed, and they hastened on toward the mountain. All depended on reaching the foot-hills before the Regulators.

CHAPTER X.

THE SIEGE OF THE CAVE.

As the fugitives gained the open space their footing became reliable and they were able to run rapidly, but it was not long before loud shouts in the rear announced that the roughs were in pursuit.

Nothing could have saved them then had Zella weakened, but she retained her courage in a way which surprised her champion and they were yet beyond revolver-shot when the broken country was reached.

Rube saw with some uneasiness that day would soon be upon them, and dangers seemed to thicken. At the best, Sam Lefferts knew the situation of the cave and could send men to intercept them if he was wise enough, and with daylight to render them plainly visible it would be a hard pull.

"Are you capable of ascending this mountain?" he asked.

"Anything; I could almost fly. But, don't fear for me, I have been over the mountain time and again and I'm sure I can move as rapidly as you."

She set the example by running lightly up the rough way, and Rube followed with increased confidence.

The shouts of the roughs had grown dangerously near, but a little while later it became

evident they were being shaken off. Both the young people were lighter than they, and these things tell in a race.

Thus they gradually neared the cave, and just as day was breaking the guard was amazed to see his captain appear from the outer air with a young lady in charge. He made no comments, but when once more alone could not avoid thinking that it would be very pleasant to act "Vigilante" if the cave was to be stocked with young ladies.

Redtop Rube had a painful duty to perform; Zella must know that her father was dead.

She bore the news better than he had expected, but her assertion that she was "left alone" touched his heart deeper than ever and he vowed she should never want for brotherly care while he lived.

Ellice Norton was mentioned, but Zella had never seen her, nor had she known that another girl was kept prisoner at Beldick's, so the proof of Ellice's real character must come in the future.

Once at the cave fatigue and sleepiness had so assailed the young leader that he could scarcely keep his eyes open and, calling Brown Ben, he directed him to manage affairs and himself sought a bed.

He soon fell asleep, and when he awoke it was from a dream in which he was a boy again and firing particularly gigantic fire-crackers; and when fairly awake the dull reports were still borne to his ears.

Instantly he bounded to his feet as he realized that fighting was going on, and as he left his niche saw Zella and Ellice. The latter swooped down upon him at once.

"Oh, captain!" she exclaimed, "those terrible men are trying to enter the cave—" "So I see!"

Rube spoke curtly and strode past her.

"Well, I must say he isn't very polite," she observed, evidently disconcerted, and then she more slowly added: "He wasn't that way last night."

"He must attend to his duties first of all."

"Are you well acquainted with him?"

"No."

"Do you suppose he is a worthy young man?"

"I really don't know."

"I would like to know," said Ellice, with seeming ingenuousness, "for he seemed to take a great fancy to me last night, and I don't want to give any encouragement to a man I can't trust."

Zella smiled faintly, for as Miss Norton had confessed that she never saw Rube until the previous night, it looked as though she was somewhat hasty in getting such business-like views into her mind.

Rube soon reappeared, accompanied by Jack Silver, but Zella saw no anxiety in their faces. On the contrary, the Vigilante prince had found his men holding the entrance well under Brown Ben, and he and Silver were merely making a tour of the interior to make sure there were no other entrances.

The besiegers felt tolerably secure on the whole, though their feelings would have been more pleasant had they possessed a better stock of provisions both for themselves and their horses.

Outside the voice of Sam Lefferts was plainly heard giving orders to his men, but he took good care to keep himself out of sight of the zealous and close-shooting cowboys.

Redtop Rube made a careful survey of the whole interior—a work requiring some time, since there were many branches of the main room, running here and there. One other opening was found, and this of a nature which Jack Silver unclosed his taciturn mouth to term a "skylight."

At the very top of the ridge a small opening led to the outer air, one through which the explorers passed only by some squeezing, but through they went, resolved to get a view of the scene around them.

Nothing could have been more successful, for, looking down to the gulch, they saw the besiegers at their post, and their horses not far away, the latter eating the fodder that had been brought for them.

All this gave Rube an idea. His party, as we have before said, was weak chiefly in the scarcity of food for both man and beast, and it occurred to him that it would be an excellent idea to secure whatever was in the enemy's camp.

Jack Silver, being a man of deeds rather than of words, was not made a confidant, but they returned to the cave, secured the entrance as well as possible, and hurried back to the main room.

They had come just in time, for the besiegers

had ceased firing, and a white flag was fluttering from a large boulder.

Brown Ben, after some delay, was about to notice it, when Rube's return relieved him of the responsibility.

The latter at once put out a responsive signal, after which Sam Lefferts appeared, and the two met on the level space in front of the cave.

"Glad ter see yer," said Sam, abruptly. "I didn't know but what you would feel so peart in your six-by-seven cave that you wouldn't come out."

"I believe it was you who took the first steps," said the Vigilante, coolly. "I have come to hear what you have to say."

"That's easily done, an' I'll come right down to ther p'int. I'm hyar as a friend."

"Just the impression I received when you began firing on the cave."

"Oh! that was only playfulness. We took keer not to hurt anybody."

His audacity was refreshing, but Rube remained as unmoved as ever.

"Well, sound your bugle."

"I will that, an' I want ter say right here that my friends are d'reff'y worried by all this fightin'. Torpeder Gulch an' its citizens are men o' peace, an' this trouble has teched them sensitive. They want ther hatchet ter be buried, an' that's why I'm here."

"In order to secure their end, they have only to march back to the village and leave us alone."

"Yas, but they object ter an armed force on ther s'ile."

"Had they behaved themselves, the armed force would not have been here."

"Mebbe they was a leetle hasty, but they mean wal now. Do you agree ter ther proposition?"

"I've heard but little of it so far. What do you want?"

"First, that ther armed force go away; secondly, that you go away an' sw'ar never ter return; an' thirdly, that you surrender Zella Halpine inter our custody."

Rube laughed lightly.

"Now you begin to talk. Why didn't you say at once that you wanted Zella? For a plain, blunt man like you there has been a waste of breath. Well, in answer, let me say that both myself and the 'armed force' are willing to go away as soon as the path is clear, but as for Zella Halpine—you can't have her!"

"I'm her lawful guardeen!" cried Sam.

"Lawful grandfather! What do you mean?"

"Halpine app'inted me."

"Oh! did he? Before or after you murdered him?"

"I murdered him?"

"That's what I said."

"You're crazy, Rube! Why, poor Mose committed suicide, he did. Sez he: 'I have a presentment o' evil, a feelin' that my eend is nigh. I wouldn't keer only fur Zella. Sam, if anything does happen ter me, will you keer fur her?' I said yes, an' then he made me sw'ar, an' no sooner had I did it than he killed hisself."

"That'll do, sir. You not only make a fool of yourself, but assume me to be one. Your game won't work. You killed Moses Halpine—you murdered him—and for that I have sworn to kill you. I shall not strike you in the back, and become an assassin in turn, but the vengeance of the law shall fall upon you. As for Zella, I would as soon deliver her to a wolf; let that end the discussion. You are both impudent and idiotic to pour such a mess of rubbish in my ears expecting me to believe it. Take this as a final answer."

A savage look crossed Sam's face and a curse fell from his lips. Some one had suggested that he try stratagem on Redtop Rube, and this transparent series of falsehoods had been the result.

He saw that it was labor thrown away, and his anger burst all bonds.

"I'm an idiot, be I?—an' a wolf, an' a murderer, an' so on, you said. Oh! you're a high-flier, you be, ter come from nobody knows whar an' try ter larn me! Wal, ef you want war, war it is, an' I sw'ar yer old rat-trap shall be blowed higher nor a kite. I'll kill ev'ry man on y' thet resists an' hang ther others higher than Hamann."

"Hold a bit," said Rube, placidly. "Remember it requires at least two to make a bargain. When you get us you can make Rome howl if you really thirst for gore."

"I can at least starve ye out," said Sam, with a viciousness which showed he had not failed to discover the weak point of his enemies.

"Anything else in the line of rolling thunder?"

If you starve us it would be a one-horse pleasure to hang us after the style of the lamented Haman, whose history I am glad to say you have investigated."

CHAPTER XI.

A FRESH MISFORTUNE.

THE interview was not protracted a great deal longer. Both men saw the folly of further conversation, and though Sam Lefferts eased his mind by hinting at the terrible revenge he would have in the future, the interests of history do not require their presence on paper.

Redtop Rube returned to the cave, but he did not go with the intention of remaining quiet. His rival had spoken only too truly when he mentioned the danger of starvation which menaced the little party, and Rube resolved to at once make a stroke to better the condition of their larder.

He had seen enough when at the upper entrance to show him that the Regulators had a supply of provisions, and he hoped to secure them by a bold stroke.

He explained his views to Brown Ben and asked him how many men he would require to hold the main entrance during the attempt.

"Give me Jack Silver," was the grim reply.

"Who else?"

"Nobody."

"But you may be hard pressed."

"With our shooters all ready, we can block the way with corpses so they can't get at us."

Rube said no more. He saw the pluck of the ex-cowboy and had faith in his ability. The two were stationed at the entrance and then the leader explained to the others what was required of them, but gave each man a chance to choose for himself and go or stay. The response was prompt—every one was ready for the venture.

No further time was wasted. They went to the upper entrance and silently passed outside. A few steps further they secured a full view of the besiegers. They lay in a ravine, which was a mass of piled-up rocks, and though the coveted supplies were dangerously near their midst it was clear that all were thinking of the besieged and looking only at the main entrance.

Rube gave his directions clearly and the advance was commenced. The movement was to be irregular, and very much like the "each man for himself" order, but all were to act with a common object.

It was not hard to reach the head of the ravine, but there the real difficulty began. Sooner or later they would be seen by the roughs; it was madness to hope otherwise; but the success of the undertaking depended on delaying discovery as long as possible.

At that moment fire was reopened on the cave, and Rube smiled as he heard Brown Ben and his ally make a good deal of show with their repeating rifles.

The young leader waved his hand to his men. Each one dropped on his hands and knees, and then began a slow, laborious, but resolute crawl.

It was a pleasure for the cowboys, for it reminded them of some of the events they had seen in Texas, and from rock to rock they went like Indians.

Boulders were numerous, as we have said before, but it was not always easy to pass from one to another, and the men were often compelled to crawl flat on their stomachs; the crisis must only be reached when their hands were on the provisions.

In the last respect they were successful, but just as they reached the point where they must necessarily uncover, a horse which was standing not far away uttered a loud snort of alarm.

"Now!"

Rube needed to say no more, and as one man his gallant allies sprung forward, their hands outstretched to seize the provisions.

Of course the Regulators had looked around at the snort from the horse, but what they saw was so surprising that for a moment they were incapable of motion. The sight of a dozen young fellows briskly gathering up their eatables was not according to their expectations or wishes.

Sam Lefferts was the first to recover his wits.

"It's that infernal Redtop Rube!" he howled, in a wild voice. "Shoot him! shoot the blamed critter!"

And up came his rifle and down came the hammer, its owner forgetful of the fact that he had but just discharged it.

"Quick!" exclaimed Rube; "back to the cave!"

It was easier to say than do this. They had secured the food they coveted, but the Regula-

tors were arousing like angry hornets, and it would not be easy to gain the cave unharmed.

Along the back-track they started on a run, but the rifles of the enemy began to crack, and only the friendly boulders saved them from destruction, and as it was, a bullet now and then sung unpleasantly near their ears, or flattened on a rock close at hand.

Lefferts was not long in seeing that some other means should be adopted, and then, at his command, the Regulators came leaping along the rocks in fierce and noisy pursuit.

The fugitives were soon brought to see that it was more difficult to ascend a rocky hill than to go down, especially when they were loaded and in such haste, but they were not men to falter, and they clambered steadily, the singing of a bullet now and then urging them on, if they had felt inclined to pause.

With the steepest part of the hill before them, the scene assumed a most interesting aspect—interesting to all except the Vigilantes.

All the way up the ascent men were to be seen leaping from rock to rock, drawing themselves over ledges and taking risks before which a common man would have hesitated.

Rube surveyed the scene keenly, keeping well in the rear of his men, and resolved to show fight with a vengeance if the worst came.

Outnumbered as they were, it would be a lucky foe that could reach them by that rough path.

But, hurrah! the top of the ridge grows near at hand, the danger grows less as the distance shortens, and the triumph of the little party seems assured, when a rock upon which he had relied, gives way under the foot of Redtop Rube, and he reels, falls, and goes rolling down the ascent.

As soon as possible he regained his feet, but brief as had been the delay, it was enough to ruin his chances. He was in the midst of his foes, and as he felt in his belt for the revolver which was no longer there, they piled upon him.

He had drawn his knife, but the force of numbers dashed him to the ground, and the weapon flew from his hands.

Still undismayed, he endeavored to shake off the weight upon him. Vain attempt! with the Regulators collecting around him like wolves on a wounded buffalo, he was held firmly and menaced at more than one point by sharp-edged knives.

Too proud to make a useless struggle, he lay in the grasp of his enemies without motion, and the single glance he took up the hill, showed his band still making for the secret entrance.

His misfortune had not been observed.

Just then Sam Lefferts appeared and burst into a loud laugh at sight of his helpless enemy.

"So you've got taken in, you venomous leetle reptyle!" he said, in high glee. "Right after bragging so much, an' lashin' me with your tongue, you fall inter ther web jest like a fool fly. Oa! you're a sharp boy, you be!"

"That's right, Samuel," was the cool reply, "you've got the upper hold just now and I advise you to free your mind."

"I'll do more!" Lefferts declared. "I'll make you free yourn before I get through with you; I'll make you howl like a painter in a trap."

"That's another matter; I was merely looking out for your pleasure."

"Don't you worry about me. Here, give those fellows a dose of lead!"

The Vigilantes, having reached the entrance to the cave, and being in a happy mood at what they thought their triumph over their enemies, had at last looked around and discovered the absence of Captain Redtop.

They could not fail to comprehend what meant the group half-way down the hill, and there were so many signs that they intended to move to his aid that he raised his voice in a clear shout:

"Back to the cave! Back to cover, every man!"

He would have said more, but Lefferts sprang forward and closed his hand over his mouth.

"Silence, or I'll bust your head!" he snarled. "Let them fools come down hyar ef they will; we'll make them welcome."

No doubt he would, in his way, but the chance was not given. Brave as the young Vigilantes were, they were not fools by any means and they saw the wisdom of their leader's words.

One by one they disappeared through the narrow entrance until all were inside the cave. Once Lefferts reached out and took a rifle from one of his followers, but he did not raise it.

"So your gang has two doors," he said, thoughtfully. "I'll see that both are kept

closed after this, an' ef I can't get inside any other way I'll blow ther hull ridge inter pieces. Back ter ther gulch, men!"

They obeyed, taking Rube with them. He had been bound so that he could not use his hands and was practically at the mercy of the roughs. Their mercy? The words seemed out of place, for the emotion was a stranger to them.

Having reached the ravine, Lefferts looked at the few crumbs left of the former stock of provisions and expressed his views in his usual fashion. The besieged now had enough food for man and beast to last three or four days, and they had gained a very important point.

Sam, however, was a persistent hater, and he had no sooner seen his prisoner firmly secured than he went on a tour of observation.

The discovery of the second entrance had given him a hope that there might be more, or that he could in some new way reach and strike his enemies.

He returned at the end of an hour, his movements hastened, perhaps, by the renewal of firing before the cave, but when he saw it was unimportant he sat down on a rock, his expression unusually sour.

It was plain that he was thinking deeply, however, and at the end of half an hour he sprung to his feet and slapped himself congratulatingly on the thigh.

"I have it!" he declared. "Git a flag of truce!"

CHAPTER XII.

SAM LEFFERTS'S LITTLE PLAN.

THE manner of the young rough had undergone a very perceptible change, and where he had been surly, he was suddenly jubilant. It was plain that some idea had flashed upon his mind which, if not brilliant, was for the time just as good—he believed in it.

The flag of truce was brought and he waved it exultantly around his head.

"We're goin' ter end this affair right away," he said confidently. "You kin ease up on the shootin' while I talk a bit with them critters, an' then, ef they choose ter be sarcy, we'll make them yell."

Some one remarked that all this would please them, and then, after thrusting the flag into Rube's face with brutal facetiousness, the young villain toiled up the ascent to a favorable place for an interview, something he soon secured by means of the flag and Brown Ben came out to meet him.

"Hallo, Old Hundred!" was Sam's swaggering greeting. "How d'ye find things in thar?"

"Right peart," Ben answered, coolly.

"Glad on't. I s'pose ye know we've got yer cap'n?"

"Yes," said the lieutenant, briefly, and long-ing to fling himself on his enemy and thus equalize matters.

"What d'ye s'pose we're gwine ter do with him?"

"Don't know."

"Wal, ef you don't trot out ther gal, Miss Zella, I'll show you ther biggest circus you ever see'd purty soon."

"We sha'n't surrender ther girl," Ben doggedly said.

"Then Mr. Redtop Rube goes up ther flume."

"You wouldn't do that, would ye?"

Lefferts broke into a loud laugh.

"I'll tell ye what I'll do. I'll place Redtop Rube over a keg o' gunpowder an' start a fuse that'll blow him ter thunder ef you don't trot out ther gal. I give ye fa'r warnin', ther men o' Torpedo Gulch are done with foolishin'; they don't like ther idee o' hevin' strangers come in an' run ther burg, an' ez I am ther regularly app'ointed boss o' ther town, I'm goin' ter see ther views respected. We want Zella Halpine 'cause she are a legal voter, but we don't want Redtop Rube. I tell ye fa'r thet ef you don't produce ther gal I'll blow Rube inter mince-meat."

This long speech was delivered with the swaggering air of one who feels himself master of the situation, and as Brown Ben had become devoted to his leader he was accordingly depressed in spirits.

He made a little plea for mercy—something he would not have done for himself—but Sam remained unmoved. He had but one proposition to make; if Zella was delivered to him he would free Rube; otherwise the latter would be blown to pieces in sight of all.

Poor Ben was in a tight corner, but rough though he was it was a part of his creed to stand firm when fighting for the right, or for

women, while if he had been tempted to give up Zella there arose in his face the positive belief that this would not save the Vigilante prince.

Toward him Sam had an undying hatred, and he was not at all likely to abandon his revenge for a lesser object.

Believing thus, the lieutenant declined to make any such bargain, and they separated in a venomous mood.

"Jest you keep your eyes open for a circus!" was the farewell Lefferts threw over his shoulder.

Brown Ben returned to the cave, and was met near the entrance by Zella and Ellice Norton. He did not need to tell them what had occurred.

"I am going out!" declared Zella.

"Sho! What for?" Ben inquired.

"I heard what Lefferts said, and I will not allow Mr. Redtop to suffer for me. Sam won't kill me."

"She tried ter go out before, but I stopped her," said the guard, who had, indeed, been put to considerable trouble to keep the brave girl from at once surrendering herself.

Ben admired the spirit by which she was actuated; but as it would be a mere sacrifice, he hastened to present the case in its proper light. As well trust a rattlesnake as Sam Lefferts.

In the meanwhile, that worthy had returned to his men, and was preparing for his grand scheme.

Rube was taken to the top of the ravine where one of the few trees of the vicinity found root, growing near the verge, and looking weak and forlorn enough.

The first move of the Regulators was to take a keg of powder, and digging a little hole beside the trunk of the tree, set it on end in such a way that it was immovable, and then Rube was directed to stand upon it.

He was beginning to comprehend their plan, and bound as he was, he hesitated. Near at hand was the verge of the ravine, and just there the descent was forty or fifty feet sheer, but it looked more inviting than the powder-keg.

His views were not consulted, however.

"Pick him up, ef he's too weak ter stand!" sneered Lefferts. "This hyar is his first meetin' with danger, an' I'll let you see him howl like a whipped dog. I say, Redtop, how do you like it?"

"Talk sense if you want an answer," said Rube, with a coolness we confess he did not feel.

"Oh! this is sense; red-hot sense, as I'll show you. That's it, boyees, tie him tight."

Under Sam's directions, the Vigilante was indeed tied tightly—so tight that at the end of five minutes he could not have moved body or legs an inch, while his feet rested on the powder-keg in such a way that they were equally helpless.

Attention was next given to his arms, which were drawn upward, crossed above a limb which happened to grow at just the right distance, and tied in that position.

Thus, when their work was done, he stood on the keg, immovably bound to the tree, his arms stretched aloft at full length.

"I strongly suspect you ketch onto my little idee, Redtop," said the young ruffian. "I am goin' ter run a three-foot fuse from ther bung-hole o' this keg out this-a-way, arter which it will be fired, an' unless yer friends care enough about yer ter trot out ther gal in your place, ther instant ther fire teches ther powder you'll sail up skyward about two hundred feet, more nor less. Fine prospect, ain't it?"

"Nothing extra."

The Vigilante prince was sorely troubled, but he would not give his enemy the pleasure of seeing him show fear. Pleading would certainly make no change in the situation, and, if he must die, it were better to die like a man.

"Oh! you wait till ther fire gits about six inches from ther powder. I've fixed ye so you kin watch it, an' I do vow it'll be better nor a hotel fire."

The young ruffian punched his prisoner facetiously under the ribs, enjoying the affair as a base nature will, and then gave fresh directions to his men.

Up to this time their movements had been hid from the view of those in the cave by a fringe of intervening bushes, but Sam knew the removal of these would afford an ample chance for the Vigilantes to watch, and the hour seemed fraught with triumph.

All the Regulators were now called up, and the two places of exit so guarded that a sally on the part of the besieged would be madness, while the gang sent to clear away the bushes per-

formed their work so well that those in the cave could see all.

Brown Ben hastened to use the small telescope one of his men possessed, and as he saw that, unless appearances were very deceptive, luckless Rube was really standing on a powder-keg, his nerveless arm fell to his side.

Zella sprung forward and grasped the telescope.

"Let me see!" she said, breathlessly.

"No, no, child!" Ben huskily answered, retaining the instrument. "It is nothing. Go to your room. You—you are in the way here."

"You cannot deceive me!" she said, firmly. "Let me know the worst. Reuben Redtop is doomed by those wretches; I must, I will go out!"

She tried to reach the entrance, but he caught and held her.

"Would you see him die?" she demanded, wildly.

"I would not see you fall into their hands, too, when it will do no good."

"Coward! you hope to see him die so that you may be captain of the Vigilantes!"

It was an ungrounded and ungenerous charge, as no one knew better than Zella, but she had lost her self-control for the time.

Brown Ben flushed slightly, but, wild and excitable as he could be at times, he had a good deal of the same cool nature that belonged to Rube, and now he acted with the kind resolution of one far older than he.

"Remove both these girls to their room," he said to Jack Silver.

The order, which Zella deemed most cruel, and against which Ellice Norton loudly protested, was promptly put in execution. It gave kind Ben some uneasiness, for he hated to deal rudely with a girl, but he saw matters arriving at a crisis, and was resolved that Zella should not interfere through any mistaken sense of duty, as she was trying to do.

He called the Vigilantes around him.

"Boys," he said, "you see our captain out there in an infernal fix. Just so sure as the sun shines Sam Lefferts will blow him into pieces unless somebody chips in, while it is pretty sure that death awaits whoever *does* chip in. Now, boys, they are forty odd and we are ten. Who is willing to make a dash when the crisis comes and risk what seems sure death?"

"I!"

The response was rolled out by the little band with gratifying unanimity and volume; every man had spoken. Brief as had been their acquaintance with Rube, they liked him well, and they were men accustomed to every wild scene and foray common to Texan soil.

"Then, by Jupiter!" cried Ben, "we'll be in at the death!"

The death seemed very near, for, as the last of the bushes had been cut away, Lefferts deemed it wise to have the fuse fired so that the rifles of the Vigilantes could not play upon them.

"Now, then, see what your friends will do for you!" he sneeringly said to Rube. "They call you leader, but they'll set on their heels an' let you be blowed up, fur which their excuse will be that they like ter see a man rise in their world!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW THE PLAN RESULTED.

WITH this would-be facetious reply, Sam Lefferts turned and hastened away. He had no desire to tempt the Vigilante rifles, and the fuse had been properly fired.

We need scarcely say that Sam was acting in his usual villainous fashion. If Ben had been foolish enough to surrender Zella, Sam would have received her with pleasure, and then have butchered Rube just the same. Even as it was, he intended, if Zella came out and gave herself up to let the fuse burn on.

Redtop Rube was in the tightest corner of his life. He was bound so that he could not stir to any extent whatever, except by swaying the tree, which he was able to do somewhat; but that would not free him, and he was as helpless as a child.

He looked at the fuse and the creeping flame. It burned steadily and approached the keg all too fast. At the latter point one end of the fuse disappeared inside the keg, and it was easy to imagine how the fire would creep in the same way.

Then—farewell to earth!

As the evil-eye of a serpent mesmerizes its human victim, so did the tiny flame gain power over Rube. His gaze was fixed upon it, and as he watched the fuse grow shorter he seemed unable to turn his eyes away.

When this fact dawned upon him he exerted

his will and succeeded, however. He flashed his gaze around; no one was in sight; he seemed to have the scene all to himself. True, the deadly powder was a companion, but it was not one he liked.

He looked toward the cave, and, having no doubt but that he was being watched from there, raised his voice in a hail, calling the name of his lieutenant.

Brown Ben promptly answered.

"Keep your place, in there!" added Rube, clearly. "You can do me no good, and you must take care of the girl and of the band. Do not treat with these men; they would break their word and I should die just the same. Stay in the cave!"

Lefferts had not thought it necessary to gag his prisoner, but he now appeared at the westward side of a boulder, where he was invisible from the cave, and roared a command to his victim to be silent.

His threat of bodily harm, in case the shout was repeated, was somewhat absurd under the circumstances.

The Vigilante looked at him with cool contempt. The interruption served to take his thoughts from his approaching fate and was rather welcome than otherwise, but his eyes soon turned toward his feet.

The burning fuse was growing short; the fire was nearing the powder; and that meant death to Redtop Rube.

Once more he strained at his bonds, but the only effect was to make the frail tree sway back and forth; the cords had been well secured.

The rocking of the tree, however, gave him an idea. It was so feebly rooted that, if unbound, he could easily have pulled it over, and though no lasting good could come of it, he resolved to try to disturb Sam's plans.

In thus resolving, he forgot the precipice behind him, over which the tree must surely go if it fell backward.

He began to rock it as he had decided, and all the while the creeping flame moved on toward the powder. It was a thrillingly in-eresting moment for all. From behind the rock Sam Lefferts watched both prisoner and the cave; from the latter point Brown Ben looked through his telescope at the burning fuse, his men standing ready for the rush when he gave the word.

Come what might, he would not see his leader die thus under his very eyes.

Rube still rocked the tree, and as it would move and move it was a wonder Lefferts gave no heed. Did he fail to observe it, or did he think there was no danger of uprooting it?

On crept the flame; it moved very slowly, but to the prisoner it seemed to rush.

Suddenly there was a snap, as though a large root had broken, and then the tree bent slowly backward—back toward the precipice—while the earth gave way around its foot and it was left unsecured.

Friend and foe looked in surprise as, going rapidly when once it course was assured, the double object receded from its former position; and then all became breathlessly interested as the tree fell over the edge of the precipice, bearing Redtop Rube with it!

The young Vigilante had not been slow to perceive his new danger when the course of the tree became certain, but the furious effort to burst his bonds proved again futile, and with that sickening sensation a fall always gives, he went over the brink.

The tree struck in such a way that the shock was but slight, but in a moment more it was going downward, top first, and as a result Rube was going *head-foremost*.

Fifty feet below he had a view of jagged rocks, upon which a fall meant death, but he closed his lips tightly and uttered no cry.

Down!—down!

The tree started briskly on its course, but only a few feet had been passed when, with a slight shock, it stopped and seemed to be suspended in empty air.

Taking a more practical view of the case, the youth looked upward and saw that the roots of the tree had caught on the edge of the precipice, and there was another reprieve secured.

It was a strange and thrilling situation.

The tree swayed dangerously, and Redtop Rube every instant expected its frail support to give way and dash him on the deadly rocks which showed raggedly forty feet below.

Suddenly, there was a sound of firing above, loud shouts and angry yells, the clash of steel and the crack of revolvers.

What could it mean?

There seemed but one answer; the Vigilantes

had sallied from the cave and attacked the roughs.

"Useless!" almost groaned the youth; "they will give their lives in vain. They are but a handful compared with Lefferts's gang; they cannot help me; and by this mad, but noble, attempt they will make the triumph of the Black Regulators complete!"

The strife seemed to have reached a point of fury above, but its echoes were so painful, speaking as they did of the annihilation of Brown Ben's men, that Rube turned his attention to his own situation.

The roots still held, and had it not been for his weight would have been enough to firmly return the tree, which was but light of weight, but with his hundred and fifty pounds added they seemed liable to give way at any moment.

Then—forty feet below were the pointed rocks!

To fall seemed sure death.

Ha! the tree slips a bit; the weight is pulling it over; it will soon fall.

A feeling of horror assailed the Vigilante prince. Brave he was, but where is the person, man or youth, who could meet such a fate calmly?

With the blood settling in his head, face and neck, his sight grew blackened and misty, the veins swelled and darkened, and he almost wished the end might come quickly.

Again the tree has a shock; the roots have slipped another inch; it cannot hold many moments longer.

Redtop Rube no longer knew whether the fight raged above. His mind began to wander and was scarcely conscious of his own situation.

Perhaps ten seconds passed, or it may have been as many minutes—he had no means of telling—and then a greater shock ran along the tree; it seemed to give way entirely; it moved downward.

Redtop Rube was prepared for the worst, but very much to his surprise, he did not go down as he expected. The movements of the tree were eccentric. It whirled around once, and then, unless he was greatly mistaken, *steadily arose*.

He winked briskly several times, and, looking up, saw beyond the room of a doubt that this was true. The tree was going back in the same path it had come.

Strange fact!—unheard-of phenomenon!

Steadily it pursued its course, and then, moving to the level, both it and its human burden became stationary and horizontally placed.

The bonds which held the youth fell away, his head was lifted, his mouth opened and some fiery liquor ran down his throat.

He gasped, opened his eyes and saw Brown Ben.

"Hurrah!" cried the faithful lieutenant; "I knew we would bring him around. Captain!—I say, do you hear me?"

Rube made a great effort and gained his feet. His prostration was rapidly passing away, and, though he still needed Ben's arms, he spoke clearly.

"The Regulators! Where are they?"

"Running pell-mell for Torpedo Gulch!" cried the lieutenant in great glee. "They are scattered to the four winds, and the powder won't explode to-day. We have nipped that little scheme in the bud, but not alone. These men were our allies."

As he spoke, a stout, bearded man came to Rube's side.

"I don't s'pose you know me, Cap'n Redtop," he said, "but you may remember a man by the name o' Lane, who offered you his help at ther Gulch. That's me. I was ter meet you in Thunder Pass to-day, but neither on us was able ter get there."

Rube's head was by this time clear, and he had no difficulty in remembering Lane, while he also remembered that Zella had said the man was perfectly honest and trustworthy.

He took his hand, and then it was soon explained to him how the Vigilantes, under Brown Ben, had made a dash and had been promptly seconded by Lane and half a dozen of Sam Lefferts's men, who had gladly seized the chance to desert the Regulators and work for the cause of the right.

Their united efforts had put the Regulators to flight, and then the tree had been raised from its singular position by means of lariats, and Rube saved from his impending fate.

He had had a "close call," but by the help of Providence and his good friends, had come out of the jaws of death unharmed. The fuse had been pulled away and trampled on, thus preventing an explosion of the powder, but a fire had been started in Rube's mind, which might cause a greater explosion.

CHAPTER XIV.

TREACHERY.

THE Vigilantes lost little time outside the cave. Their triumph was so complete, as far as it had gone, that Rube was inclined to follow it up and strike the foe anew. A good general never lets a beaten enemy retreat in peace if he is in condition to follow.

"We will return to Zella and talk matters over a little, and then the war shall be pushed into Africa."

"What of Sam Lefferts?" asked Lane.

"He is the murderer of Moses Halpine, and as the latter met his fate by working for me, I'll try to avenge him if you and your friends, representing the best men of Torpedo Gulch, say the word. When I named my band the 'Vigilantes' it was an unwarranted assumption of the name, but we will make it a thing of fact if you so vote."

"We do so vote. We represent three-fourths of the wealth of the Gulch, and have only hired those ruffians to work for us because honest men stood no show in the town. Clear away this element and we are all your friends, while in the fight we'll serve under your lead and obey you as do your other men."

It was an offer Rube would not refuse, and though the Vigilantes were still in the minority, they felt capable of winning the day.

The united force returned to the cave, where Brown Ben had left two men as a guard when the dash was made. The lieutenant was in advance, and as he passed within his face clouded. Both the men were invisible, and that certainly meant something wrong.

"Alf! Alf Belden! Where are you?"

All had paused, and as Ben heard a sort of choking sound at one side he strode in that direction.

There lay Belden, bound and gagged.

The lieutenant's hands moved quickly, and as soon as the gag was removed Belden spoke; he had not been long enough confined to have stiff jaws.

"Quick!" he said, excitedly. "They may not be got away yet."

"Who? Was it Sam Lefferts?"

The question came in Rube's keen voice. He saw that some misfortune had fallen, but he intended to make sure.

"No; it was Ned Norris an' that tiger-cat, Ellice Norton. She bewitched him an' he turned traitor. It was him what tied me up."

The case had been stated in a nutshell, and Rube's opinion of Miss Norton was confirmed.

"Which way did they go?"

"Toward ther upper entrance."

Rube dashed away, followed by his men, and the cave and the adjacent vicinity were soon searched. Useless work; the entire party—Ellice, Norris and Zella—had disappeared.

Alf Belden kept by his captain's side and told the story as they searched. He had not for an instant suspected that anything was wrong until he was beaten to the ground by the weight of his fellow guard, and then, by the help of Ellice, Norris soon bound him.

It had been so quietly done that Zella, who had gone to the extreme limit of the entrance, heard nothing, and was brought to the realization of her fresh misfortune when seized by Norris.

She had been hurried away despite her struggles, and Belden had seen them no more.

By the time the disconnected story was told, the foot of the mountain was reached, and the roughs were seen just entering the village, while the fluttering of female clothing told that Zella and Ellice were there.

"Baffled!" muttered Brown Ben; but Rube turned to Lane.

"What would be the chances if we made a charge?"

"I'm afraid it would work mighty bad just now. We are twenty and they near forty, and it's pretty clear we can't take them by surprise just at present."

"You are right," said Rube gloomily. "Sam Lefferts has snatched victory out of defeat by the treachery of Ned Norris."

Belden again came to the front.

"I've just thought of somethin' more, which I b'lieve explains why Ned kicked over ther traces."

"What is it?"

"This morning I heerd Ned an' that female tiger talkin' kinder sly-like, an' I ketched enough that was said to see she was tellin' him about ther gold some man had buried, and that she knowed whar it was, an' that it would make ther man who dug it up rich. O' course I put my oar in, an' then Ned seemed kinder frustrated, an' said she had be'n givin' him a wild yarn

'bout an ole monk that buried gold near a mission in Californy, near where she used to live. Now it's my opinion she made him b'lieve this yarn, an' that's why he turned traitor."

"Hold on!" said Rube quickly. "How did Ned act while he was explaining to you? Did he seem to believe what he was saying?"

"Wal, skeercely. He kinder stumbled over his words."

"Exactly; because he was lying. His story was all moonshine. If he turned traitor for gold, the real or imaginary pile of which she told him is not so far away as California."

"I have an idea!" cried Lane.

"What is it?"

"Moses Halpine buried all the gold he got—so did all the honest men about the Gulch—and I remember, when I was at the town, hearing Lefferts talking with Ellice. He suspected she knew where Halpine's gold was buried, and demanded the secret; but she swore she knew nothing about it. He bluntly told her she was lying, and so I think she was. Now, is it wild to think she upset Ned's honesty by talking of this very treasure?"

"I cotton to your theory a good deal," said Rube, promptly. "But this Ellice—who and what is she?"

"A first-class sharper, I take it. I've heard it said she had to flee from California because of some swindle in which she was engaged, and she came here to get out of sight. She has been around several weeks, but she has lived at Beldick's and kept very shady, so that few people knew she was here."

"I have had a suspicion that there was some sham in that affair when I carried her off by mistake."

"So there was. She had promised Sam to go to your cave and betray you all into his hands."

"Exactly; and when she found me carrying her away it just suited her purpose. She is, indeed, deep and artful."

Rube said no more, but, withdrawing from his men, gave himself up to earnest thought. He was fairly and, according to Arizona ways, legally entitled to purify the morals of Torpedo Gulch. The name "Vigilantes," which had at first been a boyish freak, had become a thing of fact.

A band was in existence to subdue the roughs of the town, and as its leader there was work and thinking for him to do.

The present question in his mind was whether Ellice Norton intended to deal fairly with Ned Norris, providing she had told him of Halpine's buried gold. He was inclined to think she did. The defeat of the Regulators would naturally impress her forcibly, and it seemed that rather than to follow Sam Lefferts's waning fortunes she would accept the gallant Ned as a cavalier, and, securing the gold, flee to fresh fields of action.

At any rate, it would not do any harm to watch for the pair, even though he had no idea where Halpine's gold had been buried.

He consulted with his men, and when he said that he was in favor of a bold attack on the town that night, and a settlement of the matter one way or another, every Vigilante voted with him.

With this matter settled, they took position where they could watch and make sure no one left the place, and thus they awaited the moment of action.

At that time Zella Halpine was alone in the room at Beldick's which she had previously occupied when a prisoner. She had been thrust in with her hands still bound, and giving way to despair for the first time, had wept freely, but the weakness soon passed and when Sam Lefferts entered she was calm.

The young villain's face bore an ugly scowl. He had been badly beaten in the mountain, where death and desertion had deprived him of one-fourth of his men, and this fact, with the supposed escape of Redtop Rube, more than overbalanced the capture of Zella.

He looked at her with an evil smile.

"Well, you're cooped up ag'in, ain't ye?" was his coarse taunt.

"You ought to know."

"And so I do know. I've got ye, but trouble enough you hev made me. Do yer know ther blood o' all them men is on your head?"

"Base wretch!" she cried, passionately, "how dare you speak to me?—you who murdered my father."

"I've already said that Mose committed suicide!"

"Don't trouble yourself to repeat it. Nobody believes you. I know my dear father too well to suppose he would proceed to such a step. Your hand, Sam Lefferts, took his life!"

She had arisen and was confronting him with eyes whose flashing anger awed him for a moment, but he forced an unnatural laugh from his throat, and looked like a dog which first cringes and then shows his teeth in a surly way.

"You kin hev this matter jest as you please; I don't go out o' my way a peg ter change your views, but I will try ter give ye practical proof that I mean you wal, my pritty one!"

His smile became more natural, but it was one which made Zella shiver.

"Ef I have robbed you of a father," he continued, "I'll try ter fill up ther gap in ther family. What d'ye say ter a husband in place o' a parient?"

Zella's heart sunk and her face paled. Sam had long and industriously made love to her, but there was that in his manner now which told that affairs were to be pressed to a crisis.

She could not answer, and then he added:

"Thar's a minister in ther burgh, an' I've asked him over here. He's come, an' now we will be tied up in the shake of a deer's huff. You will find me a right nice, indulgent husband, chicken."

CHAPTER XV.

THE BURIED TREASURE.

ZELLA found speech at last, but she spoke with a manner as though the terror which had at first chained her tongue was now what made her speak, having become too much for her endurance.

"Oh! no, no!" she cried. "You would not be so cruel; you cannot! Oh! let me go away from here, and I will never come back. I never harmed you, Sam. Let me go and I'll never return!"

It was a cry from her heart rather than an argument, but Lefferts remained unmoved. He was not one to let sentiment or pity interfere with his plans, and he bluffly informed her that such was the fact.

He had sent for the minister, he had come as directed, and the ceremony was going forward.

"I'll bring good witnesses, an' see that all is did in first-class style," he added, as he went out.

Zella sunk into a chair, miserable enough, and wishing she was with that father who had evidently left her friendless. Friendless? No; she was not that while the Vigilantes lived, but they were now powerless.

She thought of Redtop Rube and shuddered. Her last glimpse of him had been when he vanished over the precipice. He had been kind to her, and now he was lying dead at the foot of the rock.

Truly, she seemed beset by all imaginable evils.

She struggled to free her hands, for she had the will to defend herself, feeble girl though she was, but the work was useless, and she sat down once more to await the next act in the drama.

At least an hour passed, and then the sound of footsteps outside the door was followed by the appearance of Sam, Ellice Norton, Beldick, the landlord, and another man whom she did not know.

It needed no explanation to tell her this was the minister, real or pretended, and she looked at him sharply, but the gathering shadows of evening, coupled with the big beard and profusion of hair he wore, were proof against almost any gaze.

She could not tell whether he was a villain or not.

Sam waved his hand in a wide circle.

"Mr. Smiterock, minister, and so forth, this is ther bride-elect," he announced.

The stranger bowed very low.

"Happy I am to meet her, and glad to my heart are such scenes," he said, in a whining tone.

The voice and the words were enough to convince Zella that he was either a consummate hypocrite of a minister or no minister at all; but he was a man and she would let no chance pass to try to improve her fortunes.

Earnestly she made a plea for his protection, but the coolness and patience of Lefferts were proof enough that she spoke in vain. If Sam was willing she should talk, it was because he had no fear that she would move the so-called minister.

And she did not. At the end he briefly informed her that, having learned she was an orphan, he believed it his duty to provide her with a brave and honest protector, and such he knew Sam to be.

Ellice approached to add her word, but Zella promptly turned her back upon the traitress who had brought this fresh trouble upon her,

and the young woman silently accepted the result.

Zella, young though she was, was duly observing, and she was so sure this Mr. Smite-rock was no minister that she resolved to quietly submit to the ceremony. Certainly, that was the only way to get her hands free, and while they were bound she was wholly helpless.

Accordingly, when Beldick approached and asked her to take her place she quietly submitted, though troubled by one matter. What should she say when asked if she would take Sam for her husband?

She was unexpectedly helped from her dilemma, for the minister seized the chance and, stooping, whispered in her ear:

"For heaven's sake don't let your face betray you, but you need have no fear. *I am Brown Ben!*"

Nothing could have astonished her more, just then, but the voice was too familiar to be doubted. She saw that she had friends even when she least expected them, and all hesitation vanished.

Now, indeed, could she go straight forward.

Luckily, the gloomy dust of the room prevented them from reading her face, and, assuming an air of great reluctance, but resisting no further, she went through the ceremony with considerable firmness. It was a great risk to take, but she had faith in Brown Ben and felt sure he had some way provided for her escape.

The farce being over at last, she was once more left alone, only Sam and Smite-rock pausing to make comments. The former was in an exultant mood, but the Vigilante, while mumbling some words aloud, managed to slip a knife into her hands—they had been unbound for the ceremony and left thus—and to utter a few additional words of encouragement.

Sam locked the door once more as they went out, and then ordered Beldick to bring liquor for the whole crowd. He wished to celebrate his victory. Ellice, however, declined to drink and went away, when Sam turned to the so-called minister.

"By Judas! you are a trump, Dan. I knew you were just the man for the place, but you have gone beyond what I hoped. Why, your disguise is so perfect I swar I wouldn't know you!"

"Mebbe I had better keep it on awhile, and show myself to the gal to-morrow. You don't want her to smell a mice, ez she would be likely ter do ef Mr. Smite-rock vanished too sudden."

The little artifice worked well.

"You are right, Dan, jest right. Keep ther disguise on. Hi! here comes ther liquor; now, all take suthin' at my expense."

And they proceeded to do so.

In the meanwhile Ellice had left the hotel and hastened to a shanty where she found Ned Norris, the cowboy she had caused to turn traitor, sitting morosely by the table.

"So you've come?" he muttered. "I thought you had given me the slip."

"Why should you think that?" she asked, reproachfully.

"Because you was gone so long."

"That's no reason. Do you suppose I'd leave you for all of those fellows?"

She put her arm around his neck, and the poor fool allowed himself to be blinded even as he had been at the cave. He was a dashing, handsome young fellow, and they made a good couple; but while his only act of treachery was due to her evil influence, she was an adept in cunning deceit.

Rough and hardy he might be, but she was a woman of the world and of the worst kind.

She soon operated so much on his tender feelings that he forgot all but her; but he was speedily recalled to practical matters. She never forgot them.

"Are you ready for the trip after the gold?" she asked.

"All ready."

"Then we will start an hour later."

"Are you sure it was gold you saw Halpine bury?"

"I can't doubt it, now I've heard his gold was really buried somewhere. At any rate, we can look and see, and if we get fooled we can return here, and Sam Lefferts need not know we intended to leave."

Norris agreed, as he did in all things proposed by her; and thus it was that, at the appointed time, they secretly left the village and took their way toward the western hills. Some caution was necessary to do this successfully, for the Regulators were trying to protect themselves by means of pickets, but they were cunning enough to pass safely through, horses and all.

Nothing troublesome occurred until the hills

were reached, and then Ellice easily led the way to the spot where she had absently watched Halpine bury *something* one day, little suspecting it was of importance.

"Here we are, all right!" she said cheerily to Norris. "Take the spade and dig."

"It is for our future, Ellice."

"Of course, but never mind that," said the girl-woman, who did not feel like sentimentality just then.

Norris struck his spade into the ground, and then he, too, became wrapped in golden dreams. Torpedo Gulch had never been a very prosperous town, and many barely obtained a living, but Halpine had been frugal; perhaps he had a great treasure saved up.

Night had before that time fairly settled, but through a mass of clouds the moon was shining just enough to make the scene novel and romantic, as it was, despite the fact that they were actuated by such base motives.

Norris worked steadily and the earth accumulated around the place quite rapidly, while Ellice Norton stood near and watched breathlessly. She was risking a good deal on that piece of work; how much, only the girl herself knew.

Suddenly the ex-cowboy uttered a subdued cry.

"What is it?" Ellice demanded.

"Whatever is buried. Wait! here is a box!"

He stooped and grasped something at the bottom of the hole he had made. One minute he exerted all his strength and then, rising, dropped a box upon the level ground.

"Quick!" cried Ellice. "The spade! Tear off the cover!"

She did not need to urge him; he had become as much infatuated as she; and with a few sturdy blows of the spade he wrenched the box in pieces.

The interior was open to their view, and both gazed as though fascinated. Gold was there; a yellow glitter which made their eyes glitter in response.

Then down on their knees they dropped, both plunging their hands into the worshiped mass.

"Thousands of dollars, and all for us!" cried Norris.

"Are you sure it is gold?" demanded Ellice, her cold tone contrasting with his eager one.

"Sure? Of course it is; I could swear to it!"

"And worth thousands of dollars?"

"Five thousand, I should say."

Ellice stood erect. Her face seemed pale in the partial moonlight, but she had never been calmer.

"Look again at the bottom of the pit; there may be more there," she said.

He bent down, and then, with a quick motion, she thrust forward her right hand, in which glittered a revolver, and with the muzzle touching his head, pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XVI.

BROWN BEN AT BAY.

SAM LEFFERTS was a busy man that evening, for though he was giving so much attention to his private affairs, and had become a married man after a fashion peculiarly his own, he did not close his eyes to the fact that danger might be abroad for Torpedo Gulch in general.

The events of the day had so weakened his force and strengthened that of his rival, that though he had little doubt of his ability to whip the Vigilantes at any time in a fair fight, he did not think prudent to give them the advantage of a surprise.

Hence his course in posting sentinels.

Despite all his precautions, it has been seen that one advantage had been secured by the enemy; Brown Ben was in the Regulator camp, and whatever the result might be, he had contrived to do Zella a kindness.

Lefferts had studied out the idea of a mock marriage, and as he knew one of his men possessed a disguise, had sent him to his cabin to get it; but the fellow had been pounced upon by the Vigilantes, and the whole plot forced from him.

Then it was that Brown Ben volunteered to assume the disguise, and act the part of the so-called minister. It was risky work; but as Sam would expect to see him well disguised, it was at last pronounced feasible, and he entered the town.

His opening success has already been told.

Lefferts devoted a short time to celebrating what he considered his triumph, and then went outside to make a circuit of the town, leaving "Smite-rock" in the bar-room with Beldick.

The Vigilante, however, was not in the least disposed to sit down and act like a block of wood. Zella was a prisoner, he was there to

help her, and he meant to do it if such a thing was possible.

How was it to be done? He had no excuse for going again to the upper part of the house, and as Beldick was a faithful friend of the Regulator captain it was not likely he would allow any one there.

Luck, however, turned in his favor.

"It's queer where that gal, Ellice, is," observed Beldick. "She is wanted ter watch ther t'other gal."

"That's ther idee," observed Ben. "Ef yer want ter see a job nice done, set one woman ter watch another. They'll find out ther hull business, an' more too."

"I don't trust that Ellice overly," said Beldick, thoughtfully. "Ef ever anybody was all fur number one, it's her. I kinder s'pect she would shake us all bad, ef 'twas to her advantage."

"Mebbe she has sloped now."

"Wouldn't be s'prised."

"But, see hyar: What ef she means ter set Zella free? Them desperadoes may have see'd her, an' bought her over to their cause."

The idea startled Beldick.

"Durnation! she orter be watched—Zella had."

"I'm ther man fur ther job. Sam has gone away an' we must take care o' his bride. I'll go up on the other floor till we hear from him."

Beldick agreed that it was a wise plan, and Ben was not long in ascending the ladder. Once on the upper floor his manner changed. He was in the camp of the enemy and in great danger, but he intended to let no opportunity pass to aid Zella.

If nothing better could be done he would stand at bay at the head of the ladder and keep others down, hoping the predicament would be ended by the swoop of the Vigilantes.

His first step was to communicate with Zella, and he was not long in making her understand the state of affairs.

"We have now two ways before us," he observed. "We can remain here and trust to luck that Redtop Rube and his men will pull us through all right, or we can make an attempt at escape."

"Let us do the latter, by all means."

"But, it seems impossible to escape observation."

"I have a plan; wait for me."

She disappeared in the room which Ellice Norton had occupied, but soon returned so changed that, at first glance, Ben would almost have sworn it was Ellice, herself.

The latter, who was of a coquettish turn of mind, usually wore a white hat and light shawl—garments well known in Torpedo Gulch—but for the night expedition on which we have seen her go, she had taken darker-colored clothes and left these.

Brown Ben understood Zella's idea.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "I would almost swear you are Ellice, and I begin to have hopes of pulling through. At any rate, we'll make a trial."

"We must go from the window."

"More than that, we must make a hole through the roof at the rear. The quieter the way, the better our chances. Hush!"

A well-known voice was heard at the foot of the ladder, and as it seemed to ascend Ben pointed to the inner room.

"Get to cover—quick!" he said. "It is Sam Lefferts; we must pull the wool over his eyes if possible."

It was but fifteen seconds later that Sam's ugly head arose to the level of the floor, but when he looked around he saw only "Smite-rock," who was seated in a chair and calmly smoking.

"How's ther gal?" Sam asked.

"Quiet as a chick'n," was the terse reply.

"I reckon I'll go in an' see her."

"Better leave her till ther fight is over," said Ben, in alarm. "When she sees them durned Vigilantes all wiped out she'll be twic't as pliable."

"Don't you be afeered," said the Regulator, with an evil smile. "I'm a man an' she's only a chick'n, ez you call her, an' I'll make her get down on her knees an' swear allegiance ter yours truly, inside o' half an' hour."

His tone convinced Ben that arguments would be in vain and he said no more, but he was not sure he was sorry that it was so. If Sam really did lay hands on the girl, he, Ben, would chip in, and as he was confident of his ability to worst the young ruffian, the Regulators would be minus a leader.

Lefferts entered the room and stood before Zella with his old, evil smile.

"Wal, my dear wife, we meet once more," he said.

"Your dear wife! You prove how true that is by keeping me under lock and key," she said, with a boldness caused by the sight of Ben's face at the door.

"That's because you're a leetle knee-sprung in ther brain," he said.

"Strange that you should want to marry such a person."

"Oh! I think I can cure you. The power o' love is quite mirac'lous. Hyar, Mrs. Lefferts, come set on my knee."

The ruffian had seated himself, and was leering at her with an insolence he would not have shown had he seen Brown Ben's movements behind his back.

"Thank you, but I prefer to stand."

"Oh! don't be skeery. Come an' set on me knee."

The proposal made her shudder, and she refused with such an air of loathing that he sprung to his feet with a savage exclamation.

"You won't? Wal, we'll see! I want yer ter know I am boss hyar, an' when—"

He paused suddenly. He had been advancing on her with hands outstretched, but as she produced the knife Ben had given her, both his feet and his tongue came to a standstill, and he stared at her blankly.

"Keep your distance!" she said clearly.

"Whar did ye get that knife?" he demanded, in complete astonishment.

"Never mind; enough that I have it."

"You've got ter drop it, durn quick!" he snarled. "Down it goes, or I'll—"

What unmanly threat he would have uttered must remain a mystery, for at that moment Brown Ben, who had seen the folly of trying to get along peaceably and had crept up behind, neatly knocked his feet from under him, and dropping him on his back, planted his knee on his breast.

Then the glitter of another knife flashed so near Sam's eyes that the blade almost touched the iris.

"Not a word—not a yip!" said the Vigilante, sternly. "You shall not be harmed if you submit quietly, but I do swear that I am going to have my way here. You are my prisoner."

"Are you mad, Dan?" gasped the young bravo.

"No; I'm not Mad Dan or any other mad-man, but I'm in dead earnest, like Mark Twain's mother-in-law. Remember that! Zella, can you hunt up some ropes or something with which to tie him?"

It dawned upon Lefferts that his assailant was not the "Dan" whom he had believed in so much, and though he cared not to see just where the cheat came in, he was filled with a sullen fury, which shone in his eyes and darkened his face; but it was very clear that his enemy was not a man to be fooled with safely.

Such being the case, he lay very still and trusted to the future to again place him on his feet.

Zella had no difficulty in finding stout cords, and with these Sam was soon bound. Ben thought prudent to add a gag, and then their work was so well done that the redoubtable chief had become temporarily merely a child.

"We must not delay," said Ben, as he led Zella from the room. "If the Vigilantes attack there will be an immediate rush for Lefferts to lead the defense, and that will place all our hopes in jeopardy."

As though his words were prophetic there arose on the air at that moment the report of rifles, scattering, it is true, but sufficiently numerous to prove that the town was attacked.

Ben sprung toward the further end of the room and began to remove the light covering which made the roof, but at that moment the head of Beldick appeared above the floor.

"Whar's Sam?" he demanded. "He's wanted outside."

His appearance had been so unexpected that he saw not only Ben's operations but the face of Zella, and stupid indeed must have been his mind had he failed to understand a part of its meaning.

"Hi!" he suddenly said. "This way, boys; the dickens is to pay. This way, all!"

With a fierce exclamation, Brown Ben sprung toward him, his revolver turned about for a club, but Beldick was duly regardful of his precious head and he made such haste to escape his peril that he lost his footing and fell headlong to the foot of the ladder, knocking down one of the roughs who had responded to his call.

Brown Ben saw that he was in for a fight, and he met it squarely. A minute was given

him for preparation, and it was duly improved.

A glance from the window showed the streets filled with fighting men where the rival factions were galloping to and fro and "making the air hideous" with their yells, the sounds of strife and other unpleasant ways.

Ben took but a glance, and then, dashing into the other room, reappeared dragging Lefferts.

Coolly he placed the fellow in an upright position, and then, thrusting a revolver-armed hand over each shoulder, he faced the ladder-way.

He was none too soon, for just then the foremost of the enemy appeared.

He was coming with dire destruction in his eyes, but at the tableau before him he suddenly halted.

"Stay right where you are!" said Ben, sharply. "If you dare advance it means death to you and your leader."

"Hol' on, there!" cried the man. "I don't call that fair. Jest come out o' ambush an' fight man-fashion."

"Don't you shed a tear, old man. I fight according to my fashion and you can do as you please; but I warn you that if you poke your head any further into my apartment, it will lose its elegant shape."

CHAPTER XVII.

A WARM OCCASION.

BROWN BEN wound up his oration with a flourish of his revolver which made the man unceremoniously disappear, and a more hopeful look appeared on Zella's face.

"We can hold them back until the Vigilantes come," she said, firmly holding the revolver taken from Lefferts.

"I hope we can," said Ben, who did not think well to add that he doubted if the Vigilantes would come.

Relying on a dash as they did, they ought to have appeared before then, if it was working well.

The lieutenant lost no time but, leaving Lefferts on the floor, bade Zella watch the ladder and himself renewed his efforts to gain an exit by way of the roof. Once there it was probable he could find some way of reaching the ground, though all was confused and vague, and the movement might result in making them a target for the factions.

He had removed the slabs nearly enough for the purpose when a cry from Zella was followed by a racket on the lower floor and, looking around, he saw the girl pointing toward the ladder.

"What is it?"

"Lefferts!—he has rolled through the opening. It was my fault, for I did not watch closely, but I was looking at— I believe we have another danger. Don't you smell smoke?"

Ben certainly did, and he spoke quickly:

"The building is on fire!"

"They have done it to drive us out."

"No; they would not do that while Lefferts was here. Some accident caused it, but unless 'tis extinguished matters will be warm for us."

At the last word the young man ran to the opening he had made in the roof, but the view was most discouraging. The fighting seemed to have ceased, and all around the building were to be seen the Regulators.

Plainly, Redtop Rube's men had suffered a check.

Such being the case, and with Lefferts at liberty and the house on fire, Brown Ben felt that he was in a close corner.

The scent of smoke became stronger and a red tongue of fire crept up through the floor.

"It is gaining rapidly," he said, setting his teeth, "and as this old shell is as dry as tinder, it will spread all over it in a short time."

"Must we surrender?" Zella asked, as though pleading for one ray of hope.

Ben did not answer, but with considerable recklessness walked to the top of the ladder and looked down. The saloon was entirely deserted, though not yet untenable, and it looked as though they had been left to their fate; as though the Regulators were willing the house should go if the two occupants could be destroyed.

Zella was looking at her champion with anxious eyes, but for once Ben had no encouragement to give; he did not see any way of escape.

Suddenly, however, it flashed over him that he had mistaken the motive of the Regulators in deserting the saloon, and the real reason for their going was certainly enough to frighten even a brave man.

Behind the counter, and near the fire, Ben had

half an hour before seen two kegs of powder, and it was clear the others had deserted the place to save their lives.

Zella did not fail to perceive her companion's start.

"What is it?" she cried. "What now?"

But again Ben failed to reply; he was trying to think of some way to save themselves from being blown to eternity.

The shot fired by Ellice Norton was instantly fatal, and Ned Norris, who had sold his honor and his life for a scheming woman, fell forward in the pit and lay still and lifeless, a little stream of blood oozing from the wound made by the girl-fiend's bullet.

Hardened as she was, it was the first time she had ever taken human life, and her laugh was almost maniacal as she swung the fatal revolver over her head.

"Ha! ha! I win the game and the gold is mine, all mine!"

She dropped her revolver and, falling on her knees, began to handle the treasure. Nuggets were there, as well as finer grains, but all had a sparkle and glimmer which was most fascinating.

"Ha! ha! I am rich at last—rich, rich, rich!"

Wildly the words rung out, but in the pit he had dug, and which proved to be his own grave, the late partner of her guilt heard it not; he had gone to a land where gold is without alloy, but—would he share it?

How long Ellice would have fondled the stuff is uncertain, for a heavy hand was laid on her shoulder. She looked up quickly, wildly. Redtop Rube stood beside her, and close at hand were his Vigilantes.

The young man's face was stern, yet sad. He had seen all, but not for a moment did he suspect the fate in store for Ned Norris until the fatal deed was done.

He stood looking silently at the murderess, but with a serpent-like hiss she struck vainly at his face, and then tried to flee.

They caught and held her, even though she fought like a tigress, and then it was seen that she was really insane. Truly, retribution had speedily come to the two who betrayed Zella Halpine into the hands of her enemies.

When the truth was discovered, Redtop Rube was no longer disposed to make war upon her. She was taken away and one man left to guard her, and then the band prepared for the proposed dash into the town, first taking care of the gold.

Rube dared not delay a great while. The risk taken by his faithful lieutenant might result fatally if he was not promptly seconded, and Ben was too valuable a man to lose.

One of the Vigilantes, named Freeman, had proved himself a brave and sagacious fellow, and to him was given the care of the band while Rube went on a tour of observation—a work he would trust to no one except himself.

The night had grown darker since Ellice and Ned Norris began their treasure-hunt, and one must be near an object to distinguish it in any degree, so Rube felt justified in trying to approach the town.

He worked around by the base of the hills as close as was possible and then, with a comparatively short distance to go, dropped on his hands and knees and began a sort of Indian-like advance.

All this was done because he suspected the fact that guards might have been posted.

As he neared the shanties he saw a man pacing to and fro, but he was aware that the majority of amateur guards are easily outwitted. He tried it then, and in five minutes had passed the beat and was safely within the town.

Once there he stood erect and walked steadily toward the Beldick saloon, moving like one of the Regulators, except that he took the precaution to keep in the shadow of the buildings.

Beldick's had never seemed quieter and he wondered what had become of Brown Ben. The way to learn was to investigate, and this he proceeded to do.

By means of the window which once before played so important a part in his career, he took a view of the interior. Neither his lieutenant nor Lefferts was present.

He looked toward the second-story window. There he saw a light, and there, no doubt, was Zella.

Unluckily for him he remembered how he had once before carried the girl off secretly and resolved to try the same experiment again. If Ben had escaped detection and was near her, their united efforts might work wonders.

He found the very plank by which he had before ascended, and leaning it against the build-

ing, began to go up slowly, all the while watching for undesired observers.

Unknown to himself, he was watched in turn; his boldness had gone a step too far, and trouble was brewing. A sentinel posted near the place had some time before decided that he was a supernumerary, and sitting down with his back to a neighboring shanty, had kept quiet during Rube's preliminary movements simply because, until he began to climb, he was not sure he was an enemy.

Having decided on the latter point, he was too cautious to risk himself alone; but, creeping away, he collected half a dozen companions and returned to the scene.

Thus it was that Redtop Rube, when half-way up on his difficult climb, was startled at seeing a crowd of men dart around the corner and toward him.

Another moment and, before their rush, down came plank, Rube and all; and the youth only saved himself from a bad fall by an agile leap into the very midst of his enemies.

Quick to think, it had been clear to him that only by desperate exertion could he free himself, and as a result he went in with all possible vim.

Two Regulators divided the honor of receiving his weight, but it proved too much for them, and down they went like logs, while Rube, with the lightness all men envy in youth, made a second leap and struck squarely on his feet.

"Here's a letter home!" he cried, with grim facetiousness, as he planted his fist in another man's face.

The blow, or the pun, prostrated the fellow, and then those who remained standing had a vanishing glimpse of the Vigilante as he dodged behind a shanty, and then settled down to a hard run.

But he was not so easily to escape. None of the roughs were severely injured, and, looking over his shoulder, he had a glimpse of them in rapid and furious pursuit.

It needed no magician to tell him that this chase would result to his misfortune unless he could outwit them, for the village would soon arouse, so, instead of going in a direct course, he took advantage of the shanties and the darkness, and, by skillful doubling, soon had them entirely off the scent.

"I reckon the time is ripe for the coming of the Vigilantes now," he thought. "I've waked up the hornets, and, if given time, they will be dangerous."

Thus it was that a moment later a shrill, far-penetrating whistle rung out on the air, and before any one had succeeded in learning what it meant the Vigilantes came down at a hard gallop.

Redtop Rube was soon in his place at their head, and then, as the Regulators rallied to meet them, that fight began which was heard by Brown Ben and Zella, as before described.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DOOM OF TORPEDO GULCH.

THE Vigilantes struck heavily, for the older men caught the dash and spirit of the wild cowboys, and as they battled with the enemy the night air was made vocal with their yells.

At first all was in scattering form, and every one fought about as he pleased, but, gradually, the fight centered around Beldick's saloon and waged hotly. Again and again the assailants hurled themselves on the solid force that would have gladly been assailants themselves had they been strong enough, but for a long time all was in vain.

The Regulators, however, were affected by the absence of Lefferts, and Tom Trufant could not make his place good. Not that he was so very powerful in any way, but every force fights best when spurred on by a leader's commands.

He came just in time. The line was weakening when he darted from the door.

"Forward, charge!" he yelled, wildly. "Sweep them back or you are dead men! The saloon is on fire and it's gettin' nigh the powder."

Was there ever a stronger incentive? The Regulators rallied and, by a powerful effort, forced their enemies back foot by foot.

Redtop Rube saw the danger and managed to spur his horse to the side of Sam, who was on foot.

"Dog! I have you!" the Vigilante shouted; but just then a horse collided with his own with a force which knocked his revolver from his hand and almost unhorsed him.

It was Sam's chance, and while he grasped his collar with one hand, the other raised aloft a knife which glittered ominously in the light of the burning saloon.

For a moment Rube's life seemed lost, but he

had been in hard places before. There was but one way of escape and he tried it. Out of the saddle he came, swinging one arm around Sam's neck, and catching his knife-hand with his own muscular fingers, and both men fell.

They arose quickly, each armed with a knife. "Will yer fight it out here?" Sam demanded.

"To the death. Stand back, all!"

"Come and see me!"

"Age first; I'm waiting!"

Rube spoke coolly, and then as his rival leaped forward their knives crossed with a sharp clash.

"I've got ye this time," hissed Sam.

"So you thought when you tried to blow me up with powder. Try again! Ha! you vile coward!"

From out his pocket Sam had drawn a revolver, and tried a quick, treacherous shot, but he had to deal with one not easily outwitted. Redtop Rube leaped to one side, and the bullet only bored a hole in his shirt, and in a moment more an upward swing of his foot lanced his boot against Sam's arm, sending the revolver thirty feet away, and almost breaking the bone.

"Help, here!" the Regulator lustily yelled; and then his gang swept forward again.

The fresh attack not only saved Lefferts, but forced back all the Vigilantes. In vain Rube called on them for a last effort to reach Beldick's; only the cowboys responded, and the young leader would not fling those seven brave fellows against four times their own number.

Accordingly he sounded a retreat, and as they were not pursued, reassembled his force at the upper end of the village. The temporary dismay of the miners had vanished and they declared they were ready for another dash, but Rube had a new plan.

"How many of you object to firing the town?"

No one objected; on the contrary, even those who owned shanties there promptly declared themselves in favor of the project.

"So be it then; apply the torch to every cabin near here, and we'll reduce Torpedo Gulch to ashes. The wind is favorable."

Every man was ready to help, and in a short time a dozen shanties were being licked by the eager flames.

They had just finished the work when, looking toward Beldick's, they saw a thrilling sight.

One-half the building was wrapped in flames and everything in the vicinity was plainly visible, while on the roof they saw a youth and girl.

"Brown Ben and Zella! Good heavens! they must not perish there. To horse, men, to horse!"

Need enough was there of action; at the best the fire was fast making the building a fiery pit, and to leave it was to fall into the clutches of the Regulators.

"Boys," cried Rube, "let this be our last charge. We have no time to hesitate. Unless we strike hard and decisively, Brown Ben and the girl are doomed. See! even now the smoke arises and hides them. Forward, Vigilantes!"

They replied with a cheer, but at that moment the earth seemed to shake beneath them with a deep, rumbling noise as though an earthquake was abroad; a crashing, tearing, booming sound followed, and then in a mass of flame, cinders and pieces of wood, Beldick's saloon arose in the air in a thousand pieces.

The powder had exploded.

"Merciful heavens!" cried Redtop Rube, "they are doomed. Brown Ben—Zella—they are blown to atoms!"

It was a terrible thought, but it could have but one effect on the wild cowboys.

They burst into almost fiendish yells and, waving their already bloody knives above their heads, swept on the Regulators with the rush of a deadly norther.

Vengeance for Brown Bill! Down with the Black Regulators!"

The roughs heard the cry and felt almost in despair. The persistence of their enemies was strange even to them, hard fighters that they were, and the explosion had served to heighten the feeling of dismay caused by the firing of their cabins.

Truly, judgment had come to Torpedo Gulch in a flood.

Down swept the Vigilantes, and the blindest of the party could not but see that their chances had improved. The Regulators seemed like a crowd of birds fluttering around a nest rather than like the fiery wasps of former occasions.

"Down with the Regulators!"

"Hurrah for the Vigilantes!"

Wildly pealed the yells, but as they dashed into pistol-shot and delivered their first volley, the foe melted away. No one took heed to his neighbor, but each went in his own fashion and path, and it was noticeable that all seemed to have an engagement away from the village.

Beldick's saloon was in ruins.

The victors collected around the remnants, which still burned briskly, and all looked down on the two or three mangled bodies which lay in front of the former door, wondering if they were those of Brown Ben and Zella.

Suddenly one of them uttered an exclamation, and all looked around to see a blackened, wretched-looking being who had staggered from the cover of a cabin and toward the group.

In one hand he held a knife, and they could not mistake his motive, but only a few staggering steps had he taken before he fell dead.

Thus died Sam Lefferts.

The surprise was scarcely over when two more persons came from the darkness, and the crowd almost yelled themselves into pieces when they recognized Brown Ben and Zella, alive and well.

The cowboys made a rush and both were lifted and borne around in triumph until the near approach of the fire forced all to evacuate the village and take to the hills.

And how had Ben and Zella escaped?

First, when the former realized their danger, he had heroically descended to the saloon and rolled the powder kegs away from the immediate reach of the flames; and then studying the position of his enemies, had first shown himself on the roof with Zella, to deceive them, and then escaped by the window unseen.

Sam Lefferts had received his injuries by the explosion, thus meeting the same fate to which he had so coolly doomed his rival.

When day again dawned Torpedo Gulch was in ruins and the Black Regulators scattered far and wide. Evil indeed had been the day when they molested Redtop Rube.

The latter, accompanied by his band, went forty miles away and founded a new town. There they were successful, and to this day Redtop Bar is known to the majority of miners.

Ellice Norton is in an insane asylum. Of her we need only say that she sinned and now she suffers.

Zella went to the new "city" as the ward of the ex-Vigilantes in general, but we suspect she grew devoted to one in particular, for a few weeks ago she became the wife of him whom at times she still playfully calls "Redtop Rube!"

THE END.

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